



10 STORY MYSTERY

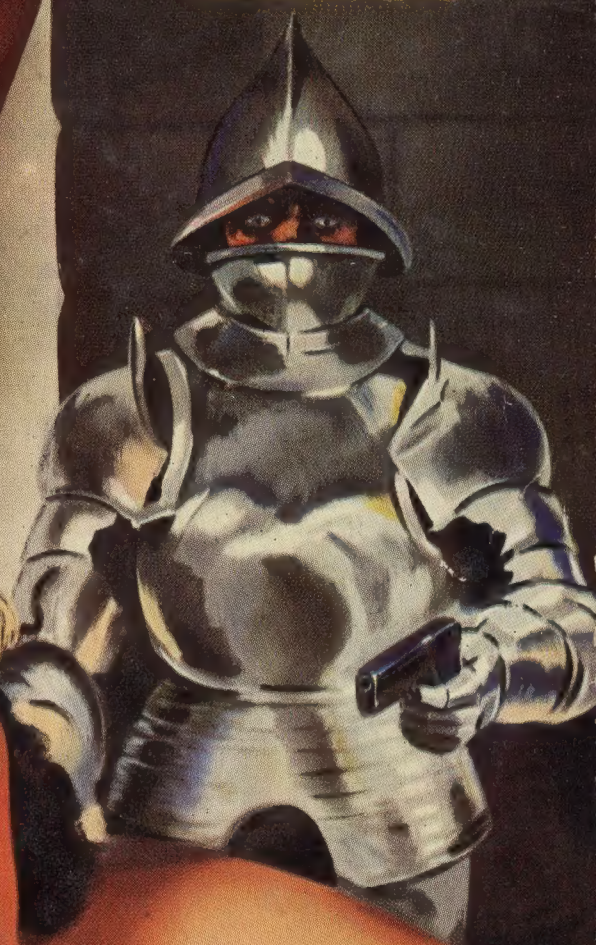
THE BEST IN
MYSTERY FICTION

MAGAZINE

**NOW I LAY ME
DOWN TO DIE**

A NOVELETTE OF WEIRD MENACE
by **DONALD G. CORMACK**

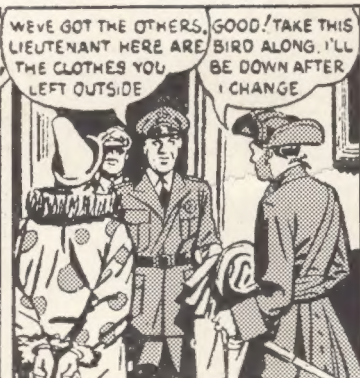
STEWART STERLING
FRANCIS K. ALLAN
G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS
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Three Novelettes of Daring Mystery

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Blindly he groped his way down that passage of fear to the Portal of No Return, and there he pondered his decision—either advance and link himself eternally with that league of the black of heart—or retreat to the sunlight—but damn the woman he loved!

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Ovington was a perfect fall-guy for a murder rap, and he didn't much care. . . . Until a gal with weepy eyes tried to knot the noose around his neck.

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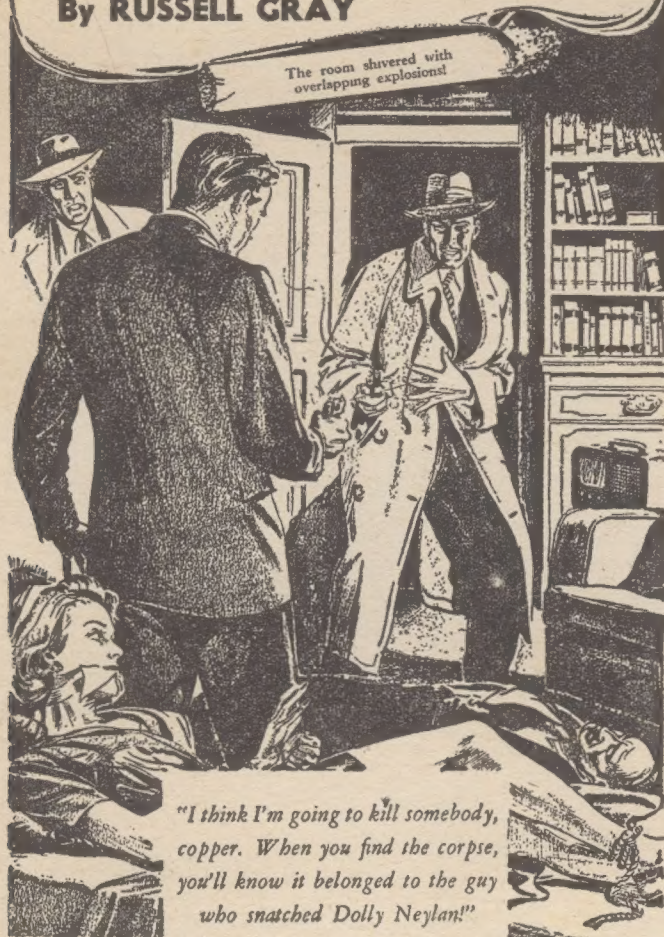
The prison years had left their mark on Ben Mason's soul. . . . But his troubles really began when he faced the riddle—"How can a leopard change its spots—when the jungle remains the same?"

Published in England by Pemberton's (of Manchester), Ltd., and distributed by World Distributors Incorporated, Clydesdale House, Turner Street, Manchester, by arrangement with the publishers. Published bi-monthly by Fietioneers, Inc., 2256, Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 210, East 43rd Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter August 27, 1941, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1942 by Fietioneers, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Printed in England by Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd, Printing Works, Reddish, Stockport.

They Knew Dolly

A Novelette
By RUSSELL GRAY

The room shivered with
overlapping explosions!



"I think I'm going to kill somebody, copper. When you find the corpse, you'll know it belonged to the guy who snatched Dolly Neylan!"

THE table was set for supper when Greg Neylan let himself into his tiny Greenwich Village apartment, but Dolly wasn't home. Greg stripped off his jacket and washed and then he settled himself next to the radio to listen to the news. Dolly was always running out of something at the last moment and had to dash down to the store.

The phone rang. Dolly's voice was breathless. "Greg? Something terrible just happened. I saw a man murdered in the street."

"Are you all right?" That was the only thing he was interested in.

"Nothing happened to me, darling," she said. "I found that I'd run out of butter and went down to the store. The man was shot right in front of my eyes. It was horrible. The street was crowded with people coming home from work and a lot of them saw it happen, but the murderer ran right past me into the house, and

I think I'm the only one who saw his face."

This was going to be a nuisance, Greg thought. Dolly would be a material witness and there would be a lot of red tape.

"Are you at the police station?" he asked.

"It happened only a minute or two ago, in front of Stork's stationery store. That's where I am now—in the phone booth in Stork's. I haven't had a chance to speak to anybody yet. Some policemen arrived almost at once, but they're chasing the man. I'll have to tell them I saw the man's face, won't I?"

"I guess so," Greg said reluctantly.

"But Greg, it's not so simple. I think I recognized him."

"Somebody you know?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure. It happened so quickly and his hat was pulled down over his eyes, but I think—" Over the wire he heard her take a deep breath. "Greg, I called home at once on the chance that you might be home already. I don't know what to do. I need you."

"I'll be there in a minute."

He hung up, grabbed his jacket and put it on while racing down the two flights of stairs. He turned the corner to Eighth Avenue. Stork's, the store where he and Dolly bought their newspapers, magazines and cigarettes, was a block and a half away. Greg wasn't conspicuous by running because other people were running too. A huge mob had already gathered, and as Greg bored his way through, he was at the receiving end of protests and dirty looks. A police cordon stopped him when he reached the clear space in front of the stationery store.

"Where do you think you're going?" a cop barked.

Greg looked around the clear part of the sidewalk. Near the curb lay a long, narrow heap covered by a horse blanket—the body of the murdered man.

Greg said, "My wife saw the murder. She's a witness."

"Just a minute. . . . Hey, Sarge." A heavy man in plainclothes came over.

The cop said, "This guy claims his wife saw the whole thing."

"Fine," the sergeant said. "Where is she?"

"She phoned me from the stationery store," Greg told him. "She's probably waiting in there for me."

"What's her name?"

"Dolly Neylan."

The sergeant pointed to a group of men and women standing near the store window. "She one of those? They're all the witnesses we rounded up so far."

"No. I told you she must still be in the store."

The sergeant rubbed his jowls. "Couldn't be. I was just in there to see if maybe some more witnesses were waiting in there. Nobody was inside."

WITHOUT a word Greg sent his long legs toward the store entrance. Mr. Stork stood beside the newsstand. His pinched, care-lined face was worrying over the newspapers he would be stuck with because the police were keeping people from passing his stand.

"Did you see my wife?" Greg asked him.

"My God, all at once there were so many people around, how can I remember?" Mr. Stork said irritably.

"Right after the shooting she used the phone in your store."

Mr. Stork furrowed his brows. "Yeah, sure, now I remember. That lady was Mrs. Neylan, but I didn't pay no attention. I'm inside behind the counter and I hear the shot and some women start screaming. I run out and see the body, but I stay in the door on account I think maybe there'll be more shooting. Then this lady shoved past me into the store. I'm so nervous I don't remember till now."

"Did you see her come out?"

Mr. Stork shrugged skimpy shoulders. "How should I see her? There's a dead man at my feet, practically, and everybody in New York coming and cops start asking me questions. I ain't been in the store since the guy's been shot. What's the use? They don't let no customers come here. It has to happen rush hour when I lose so much business!"

Greg shoved the door open and strode in. There was nobody in the small store or in the phone booth. He slid behind the counter, swept his eyes under the length of it as if he half expected Dolly to be crouching under the storage space; then he went into the back room. The walls were piled high with empty soda boxes, toy crates, and cigarette cases. There was scarcely enough room to turn around in. He looked into the lavatory, and then there was nowhere else to look.

No door led out to the back. The single window was barred against petty thieves; an inch of dust coated the sill. Through the grimy window pane he could see cops moving about in the maze of back yards.

He felt somebody at his shoulder and turned his head to see that the sergeant and Mr. Stork had pushed into the back room.

The sergeant said, "Witnesses saw the killer duck into the house next door. Probably he went through the downstairs hall and out the back door into the yard and then hopped fences. If he did, he'd be a mile away by now."

Greg swung savagely from the window. "To hell with him! Where's my wife?"

"Maybe she went home," Mr. Stork suggested. "She saw there was plenty of other witnesses."

"No," Greg said. "I told her I'd meet her here. That meant outside or in the store."

The sergeant shrugged. "I'd say she didn't want to be bothered being a witness. Lots of people are like that."

"You don't understand," Greg said. "She told me on the phone that she thought she recognized the murderer."

The sergeant noisily expelled breath. His eyes were suddenly bright and sharp. Mr. Stork leaned forward with excitement.

"Did she tell you who he was?" the sergeant asked.

"No. Why talk it over the phone when I'd be here in less than a minute? Don't you see that she has to be around?"

The sergeant was studying the soda cases and crates. "Are all those boxes solid against the wall?"

Mr. Stork looked puzzled. "I don't know what you mean."

The sergeant shifted two crates. That was when terror hit Greg in the pit of the stomach. He guessed what the sergeant was looking for. Greg moved to the sergeant's side in a single long step. Behind the moved crates and the wall there had been a space into which a body could have been stuffed. The fact that no body was there didn't lessen Greg's sick fear. It might have been there, or it might be elsewhere.

"You have another look for her outside," the sergeant told Greg.

GREG hardly breathed as he moved among the crowd. Once his heart leaped as he saw a head of curls like Dolly's, but it wasn't Dolly.

He returned to the store. In the back room a couple of cops were tossing the boxes around. The sergeant was talking to Mr. Stork near the phone booth.

Greg said, "Sergeant, you don't think that maybe behind those boxes in there—" He couldn't go on.

"It's my business to think of everything," the sergeant said gently. He addressed Mr. Stork. "You say that after Mrs. Neylan came in here, it was possible for somebody to have slipped into the store and then out without you seeing him?"

"Sure. Like I told you, I hear the shot and

stand in the door. There's a guy on the sidewalk, and maybe ten seconds later Walters, the cop on the beat, comes running over. Somebody yells the murderer went into the house next door, and Walters pulls his gun and goes after him. Then Mrs. Neylan goes past me into the store. A couple of cops arrive in a car and look at the body, and I go over to see if he's dead. All the time there's more people coming and more cops, and the cops kick me away from in front of my own store, till I tell 'em who I am. Then the cops ask me questions, which I don't know the answers to. Then Mr. Neylan comes along and asks me about his wife. All this time I don't even look in the store."

Greg said wildly, "If she recognized the murderer, perhaps he recognized her. In all that confusion, who would have seen him come into the store and then out?"

The sergeant shook his head. "Keep your pants on, Mr. Neylan. To begin with, how could he have seen her go into the store? He dashed into the house next door right after he fired the shot. Even say he did know she was in here alone, would he stick his neck out by coming back into the street?"

But Greg was hardly listening as he watched the door to the back room. One of the cops came out, dusting his hands, and Greg became a single knot of unendurable tension.

"We went over every square inch," the cop reported. "A dead mouse couldn't be hiding in this two-by-four joint."

The sergeant look relieved. "You see, it couldn't be done. A body would have to be here, which means there can't be a body."

"He could have forced her to go out with him while he covered her with a gun in his pocket."

"That would be as tough as carrying her out over his shoulder," the sergeant said. "Remember, by that time there were a lot of cops around. You don't know how fast and efficiently we work. A minute after the shooting, a fly couldn't have got out without being stopped."

"Then where's Dolly?" Greg cried.

A plainclothes man came into the store and pulled the sergeant aside, whispered to him. The sergeant looked at Greg and then at his own fingernails. He nodded to the other detective and said to Greg, "How about you and me taking a walk over to your place? Maybe she went home after all."

On the way to the apartment neither of the two men said a word. The sergeant was occupied with his own thoughts, and Greg was searching the faces of the passers-by. As they walked up the stairs to the apartment, Greg's nerves contracted.

But the apartment was exactly the way he had left it. Greg slumped into his easy chair.

The sergeant looked around. "Cozy little place you have here. Pay much rent?"

"Fifty-five," Greg replied automatically. "More

than I can afford." His mouth went crooked. "How will that find Dolly?"

"You never can tell. You working?"

"In a brokerage office on Broad Street."

"Broker, eh?" The sergeant thought that worth pondering. "Got a picture of the missus?"

Greg went heavily into the bedroom and returned with the framed photo of Dolly taken six years ago when they had been married. She still looked exactly like that.

The sergeant said casually as he slid the photo out of the frame, "Wonder how such a sweet-looking girl would come to know a dope peddler?"

At first Greg didn't get it. He was thinking of the day that photo had been taken and of all the days and nights that had followed.

Suddenly Greg's head snapped up. "What's that you said?"

The sergeant leaned against the table on which Dolly had set supper. "Do you know who the murdered man was?"

"No."

"He was Detective Jessup of the Narcotic Detail."

"You said something else before that."

"It all ties together," the sergeant said. "That detective you saw me talking to in the store just before—he's also from the Narcotic Detail. I learned from him that this morning Jessup had told his chief that he was onto something big and expected to make an arrest this afternoon. Jessup was shot down in the street before he could make the arrest. Add that up and there's only one answer. The killer was either a dope peddler or a gunslinger of the dope ring. How would your wife happen to know a mug like that?"

Greg felt his legs weaken under him. He heard himself mutter, "She wasn't absolutely sure that she recognized him. She might have been mistaken."

But he hadn't answered the sergeant's question in the only way that would have been truthful.

THE sergeant used Greg's phone to give headquarters a description of Dolly Neylan.

When he finished that, he also described Greg over the wire.

Greg commented sourly, "It's my wife you're trying to find, not me."

"We know our job." The sergeant hung up. "You better come back with me."

In front of the store nothing had changed, except that higher police officials than the sergeant had arrived. The sergeant left Greg to join them. Greg prowled through the crowd, peering with aching hopelessness at the faces of young women. After a while he realized that somebody was always a step or two behind him. He recognized him as one of the plainclothes men.

Mr. Stork, still maintaining his position in

front of his newsstand, shook his head sorrowfully as Greg passed him a few minutes later. "So Mrs. Neylan hasn't come back yet?"

Beyond Mr. Stork, Greg could see into the store. The sergeant was coming out of the phone booth. Greg looked again at the little storekeeper, then fell in step beside the sergeant as he came out.

"Look, Sergeant," Greg whispered. "This may be a brainstorm, but why couldn't it be Mr. Stork? I mean, where's proof that he was outside the store between the murder and the time the police started to question him?"

"So you think your missus is a dope, eh?" the sergeant said with a thin smile. He added hastily when he saw Greg's angry flush, "That the way you make it sound. Would she go into his store if she knew he was the killer? Would she give him the chance to get her alone? And that's forgetting that the killer was seen by witnesses going into the house next door, and that Stork couldn't have gotten her out of the store any easier than anybody else."

"It sounds ridiculous all right," Greg was forced to agree.

The sergeant smugly patted his pot-belly. "You leave the detecting to us. I just had headquarters on the phone. Inspector Drell wants to see you."

"Any news about my wife?"

"No news that'll be news to you, maybe."

Greg flashed him a sharp look, but the sergeant had already turned away to give a cop orders to drive Greg across town.

"Don't bother," Greg said. "I'll hop a cab."

But the cop took him gently by the arm and led him to a squad car.

INSPECTOR DRELL was a big-boned man with a mane of gray hair sweeping back from a corrugated temple. He didn't rise from behind his desk when Greg entered. The cop who had driven Greg there closed the door, leaving Greg alone with the inspector.

"Sit down," Inspector Drell said. It sounded more like an order than an invitation.

Instead Greg strode to the desk. "Let me get a few things straight. Why have a detective shadow me? Why have me dragged here, as if I were under arrest, when I was more than anxious to come of my own free will? Is it a crime for a man's wife to be missing?"

"Sometimes," Inspector Drell said dryly. "Sergeant Vetter has a good nose. He smelled something fishy right away about that set-up. The way your wife seems to have melted into thin air; the way she seemed acquainted with the killer for a dope gang. We already had all the information here. When Sergeant Vetter phoned in, it took only a couple of minutes to get it all together."

"I'm not good at understanding double-talk," Greg said.

"The game's up, Neylan. We've had our eyes on you and your wife for a month now. We know every move you two have made. We know where you work and how much you earn and who you see. We know about those Wednesday night meetings in your apartment. The murder of Detective Jessup is the pay-off."

Greg backed to the chair and sat down. He had a sensation of sinking into a terrible and unrelenting quagmire into which Dolly had already blundered.

He said, "Are you trying to accuse me of murder? That's sheer nonsense."

"I don't know," Drell said, tenting his fingers. "We checked on that phone call you said your wife made to you from the stationery store. We checked on when you left your office and when you entered and left your apartment. You could have made it with close timing. It could more easily have been your wife who shot Jessup."

"Dolly!" Greg started to his feet, then dropped down again. "I see, you're trying to scare me into a confession or something. Witnesses saw a man do it, so you know it couldn't have been Dolly."

"She could be an accessory, which also rates the electric chair. Maybe it wasn't her either. After all, Otto Packer could handle that end of the business. He's had experience. You'd be foolish to dust off the chair for yourself and your wife by trying to protect him."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Drell rocked gently in his swivel chair. "This is worse than dope peddling. This is murder."

Greg's head snapped up. "So now my wife and I are also dope peddlers!"

"You should know. Let me tell you a little story to show you the spot you're in. A lot of dope is being distributed in the Village and in Chelsea. It isn't being sold through the regular small-time peddlers. It's being done more cleverly—we figure through a respectable front. We have reason to believe that the dope is reaching that front through Otto Packer."

"Not Otto!" Greg broke in. "He's done a lot of things in his day, but he wouldn't stoop to dope."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes. I know Otto."

"I'll say you know him. Our men found out that every Wednesday evening Otto Packer and at least one member of his gang visit you and your wife at your apartment. An innocent set-up—two innocent-looking kids like you and your wife acting as his agent. We know how you distribute the stuff and to whom. We know Jessup was on the way to arrest you when he was murdered."

Greg laughed his contempt. "I suppose your spies have observed my wife slipping packages of dope to her neighbors under the guise of cooking recipes? I suppose I have a stand in

the Stock Exchange distributing the stuff to Bulls and Bears. That's the shabbiest excuse for a bluff I've ever heard of. By the way, where do I keep my ill-gotten gains? I could use a small part of it."

"You're in a broker's office," the inspector said stolidly. "You've been juggling accounts. You needed the money badly to keep out of jail."

Greg laughed again.

DRELL leaped to his feet, his face suddenly livid. "Here are a few things you can't laugh off. Otto Packer visits you. Years ago you two were both found guilty for the same crime."

"Oh, my God!" Greg said in disgust. "That was fourteen years ago. Otto and I were kids together, brought up on the same block. A bunch of us kids were making a bonfire. It was Otto's turn and mine to swipe the potatoes from one of the stores. It was just our hard luck to be caught, though there wasn't a kid in the neighborhood who hadn't done the same. A sanctimonious old judge gave us a lecture and a suspended sentence. That's the sum total of my criminal career."

"But not of Otto Packer's."

"That's a matter between the law and Otto."

"Yeah?" Drell carefully unwrapped a cigar from its cellophane cover and jammed it into his mouth without lighting it. "What do you do when Packer and his gunsels visit you and your wife Wednesday nights? Play parlor games?"

"If you call bridge a parlor game, we do."

Drell flashed a hard look at Greg, but Greg's face was dead serious.

"Dolly and I like bridge, and so does Otto, so we have a regular date Wednesdays."

"And play for match sticks, I suppose?" the inspector sneered.

"For one-fifth of a cent a point. It's all Dolly and I can afford. I know what you'll say. Otto goes in for gambling where there are thousands at stake. But that's business. He says the only enjoyment and relaxation he gets out of life is the time he spends with us."

Inspector Drell said scornfully, "What a lovely picture—a sweet young couple in Wednesday night bridge games with Otto Packer, king of the policy game and all-around rat!" He slapped the desk. "Go peddle that to a sob-sister, but get the idea out of your head that the police are nitwits."

"What's wrong with playing bridge with Otto?"

"Wrong!" The inspector appealed to the ceiling. "He sits there and asks me what's wrong with Otto Packer being his playmate! And being pals with the Prof, alias Henry Wabash, alias Funeral Hank, is proof to him that he's pure as a lily!"

"The Prof isn't my pal," Greg said. "He happens to be a crackerjack bridge player; that's

why he comes along to make a fourth. Sometimes it's somebody else."

"Like Lash Bogue, who has maybe killed more men than I have toes on my feet."

"Sometimes Lash, but his game is rather weak."

"Stop it; you're killing me!" Drell cried. "The boys will say I'm bughouse when I tell them I heard this with my own ears."

Greg's mouth twisted. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere. The important thing is to find my wife."

"Yeah, there I agree with you." Drell at last put a match to his cigar. "It'll make it a lot easier for you and her if you tell me where she's hiding out."

Greg stared at him. "Hiding?"

"Hiding, I said. Maybe your mother never told you such things, Neylan, but people don't just disappear into nothing. She wasn't in the store and she couldn't have left it without sneaking out under her own power after she phoned you."

"Why?"

"That's what I'm asking you, but I don't have to," Drell said. "Some way you got word Jessup was coming to arrest you two. You shot him and dove into the doorway next to the store and cut across backyards to your house. It took you less than a minute. Your wife phoned you to establish an alibi for you. Your timing was close, but not close enough."

"Why would Dolly and I stick our necks out by drawing attention to ourselves?"

"To confuse the police. You knew you were suspected of selling dope. You figured you'd divert the police from you and the murder by making them concentrate on hunting for your wife. The idea is for her to show up in a day or two with a cock-and-bull story about having been abducted. She'll make up descriptions of her kidnapers and then we're supposed to spend time chasing after them. But a couple of things went wrong. You didn't guess there was no way out of the store except through the front, or that the police would have that part of the street blocked off that quickly."

"Don't be childish."

Drell came around from behind his desk and leaned over Greg's chair. "Maybe Otto Packer or one of his hoods did it, but circumstantial evidence points to you and your wife. You two wouldn't be the first people to burn because you didn't know when to talk."

Greg wet his lips, numbly thinking. The fact remained that Dolly knew the man who shot the detective down in cold blood. How many men like that would she know? How many men besides Otto?

Aloud Greg said, "You're still bluffing."

"This is your last chance," Drell went on persuasively. "Once the D.A. gets the case, he'll strike a harder bargain than I will. I can squash

anything against you and your wife, including dope peddling. All right, be a fool hero about yourself, but what about your wife? Doesn't she mean more to you than Otto Packer?"

The door swung open. A suave voice said, "Did I hear my name mentioned?"

Otto Packer stepped into the office between two detectives.

ONE of the detectives said, "We were setting out to pick up Packer for you when he drove up in his car. He knew Neylan was in here with you. He said that's why he came."

"He did, eh?" Drell fixed smoldering eyes on Otto. "How'd you know? Neylan isn't here for more than fifteen minutes?"

"It takes only ten minutes to drive over from my place," Otto said smoothly.

Everything about Otto Packer was smooth—the mold of his features, his slick yellow hair, the way his immaculate clothes fitted his short, slender figure.

"Answer me!" Drell roared. "How'd you know Neylan was here?"

"A birdie whispered it to me."

"A birdie in the department, eh? The same birdie that told you Jessup was hep to your dope racket?"

"Jessup?" Otto raised blond eyebrows. "Would that be the dick who was murdered?" He turned to Greg, and the mocking light left his eyes. "Buck up, fella. We'll get Dolly back."

Greg nodded dully, but the words didn't make him feel any better. He had known Otto most of his life; but, after all, how much did he know about Otto? There were many sides to the man, and the Otto who visited Dolly and himself showed only one of those sides. But he was also a gangster who lived on other people's money, and who, perhaps, had blood on his hands. Would that other Otto, the strange, criminal Otto, kidnap or even kill the wife of a friend if it were necessary in order to save his skin?

Drell was saying dryly, "We might start off as usual. What's your alibi this time, Packer?"

The syrup returned to Otto's voice. "I haven't any. Surely I don't need an alibi every time a man is murdered in New York?"

"You'll need a hell of a lot more than an alibi this time."

Otto took a long time setting fire to his cigarette. Drell and the two detectives watched him in silence.

Then Otto said, "Let's get out of here, Greg."

"Just like that?" Drell growled.

"Are either of us under arrest?" Otto said in mock surprise. "Are we being charged with anything? Because if we are, you may be interested to know that my attorney is on the way here."

One of the detectives said eagerly, "Should I

clip him one, Inspector. He's pulling your leg with the ritzy talk."

Drell waved the detective back. "I know. I'd die laughing if I weren't thinking of poor Jessup lying dead. All right, Packer. You can be a wise guy now because you know I can't hold you or Neylan—yet. But, by God, this time I'll nail you down so you'll stay nailed!"

"Maybe you will at that," Otto's voice was now like the edge of a knife. "I think I'm going to kill somebody. When you find the corpse, you'll know it belonged to the guy who snatched Dolly Neylan."

Otto touched Greg's elbow and the two went out. Their steps echoed down the corridor.

"Thanks, Otto," Greg said.

"What the hell, you're my friend. A copper who's on my payroll called me about what was up. I knew that fathead Drell would try to kick you around, so I hot-footed it over."

They walked down the stairs.

Greg said, "Otto, do you sell dope?"

Otto stopped and searched Greg's face. "You think I'd touch a hair of Dolly's head?"

"No," Greg said, at the same time thinking, *How can I believe anybody?*

"I haven't bothered with dope for years," Otto said. "Too dangerous. You come up against the Federals. There are easier ways of making dough."

But once he did sell dope, Greg thought, heart-sick. He ruined the lives of hundreds of men and women in order to make a few dollars. And today he robs the poor through his numbers racket. I knew that all along and Dolly knew it, but he was charming and a friend and we thought him and his pals exciting. Now Dolly is paying for it.

Otto's custom-built sedan was parked across the street. Eggy Glass, who got his name from his bald, elongated skull, was behind the wheel. He was Otto's chauffeur and bodyguard.

Next to Eggy in the front seat sat the Prof—tall and mournful and tight-lipped. Greg had never seen him smile. His job was to figure out means to still further increase the impossible odds against the suckers who played numbers. As a bridge player he was unbeatable.

Lash Bogue had the back seat all to himself. He was a big man who didn't look big, and a fast-moving man who looked slow. He seemed to be all eyes, not because they were large or prominent, but because the cold fire in them dominated the entire man. Greg had always felt uneasy in his presence, but Dolly hadn't appeared to be affected one way or the other by him. Lash conducted himself properly, and to Dolly that had been enough.

The three solemnly returned Greg's greeting. Greg and Otto got into the back seat with Lash Bogue.

"Drive over to the West Side, Eggy," Otto said. "Now, Greg, let's have the whole story.

The copper who tipped me gave me an outline, but he sounded screwy."

GREG hesitated, remembering what these four men were. When they'd been up at the apartment Wednesday evenings that hadn't seemed to matter. Dolly had been captivated by Otto's charm, and the others had formed an exciting backdrop for Otto. But maybe, after all, they were the only ones who could help him.

So, as the car bucked crosstown traffic, Greg related everything that had happened since he had arrived home from work.

Otto was slumped on his spine, studying the point of his cigarette. When Greg had finished, he commented drily, "It sounds even screwier than when I heard it from the copper."

"Why screwy?" Lash said. "Dolly lamped the killer and he knew it. He got back in the store and took her out."

"But Greg says it couldn't be done," Otto argued.

"Them coppers is all blind," Eggy simpered, beating out a red light. "Remember that Watkins job, boss? Everybody figured—"

"Shut up, Eggy!" Otto snapped, quickly looking away from Greg.

"The fact is, it was done," the Prof said without turning his head from the windshield. "It's a mathematical problem. Maybe a tough one, but the toughest have answers. We have to think about it, that's all."

"Any of you guys know this Jessup who was rubbed out?" Lash asked.

None of them did.

Greg said, "You fellows must have sources of information that are closed to the police. If you can find out who's been handling dope in the Village, it might lead to finding Dolly."

"That's been my idea all along," Otto told him. "That's why I brought the boys along with me. They're all with you. Aren't you, boys?"

Eggy said, "Dolly is a swell dame."

The Prof muttered in a far-away voice, "I knew girls like Dolly long ago. She's the only decent thing I've come up against in years."

Lash said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Take it from me, sport, the guy who snatched her is a dead duck right now."

"You see, Greg," Otto patted Greg's shoulder. "We'll bring her back to you if we have to turn every dive in the city inside out."

The car pulled up in front of the small, old-fashioned apartment house where Greg lived. Otto slipped something hard into his hand. Greg looked down at a small snub-nosed automatic.

"What's this for?"

"Why take a chance?" Otto said. "Don't stick your nose out of the apartment and be careful who you let in."

Greg dropped the gun into his pocket and got out of the car. "Isn't there anything I can do?"

Otto shook his head. "This is a job for us. I'll be back soon. Keep your chin up, fella."

The big sedan glided off and swung into Eighth Avenue. Greg walked up the stairs like a man whose weight was too heavy for him. He switched on the living room light and stood swaying on his feet, staring at the supper plates set on the table. It was a meal he and Dolly would never eat now.

What if she were dead? She wouldn't be held for ransom because there would be nobody with enough money to pay it, and it would be dangerous to let her go. What if she were dead already?

There seemed to be no air. He felt himself choking in this apartment where everything was a part of Dolly. He went out into the night.

A minute or two later Greg raised his eyes and saw that he was in front of the stationery store. The crowd and the police and the dead man were gone. It looked the way it had every evening, with a passer-by stopping to glance at the headlines of the papers on the stand and three or four men lounging inside the store.

M^{R.} STORK stood behind the counter. "Hello, Mr. Neylan," he said when Greg entered, and at once all the other voices in the store stopped. Eyes were fixed on him with frank curiosity.

Greg kept moving toward the rear of the store. He stopped in front of the phone booth and looked in. That was where Dolly had stood the last time he had heard her voice.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Neylan," Mr. Stork said at his side.

Greg looked down at the little store-keeper. He said, "Didn't you hear her cry out? You might have heard it, standing outside."

"A hundred people outside would of heard it." *Somebody she knew and trusted*, Greg thought. *That's why she didn't cry out and then it was too late.*

Wearily he leaned against the counter. His elbow brushed something that clattered noisily to the floor. It was a hammer. Mr. Stork picked it up and put it back on the counter. A new customer came in and called for cigarettes and Mr. Stork went back to the front.

Greg reached out a hand and touched the hammer as though it were glowing hot. His stomach twisted at the thought of that iron head sinking into Dolly's skull. There was no stain on it, and anyway, where would the body be?

He left the store. He walked in a world that was a void without Dolly. After a while he realized that he was all the way down at the Battery. And he was hungry. He had coffee and a sandwich in a lunchroom on Whitehall street.

The feeling that he should be back in his apartment came over him suddenly. It was a message without substance or clarity or reason,

as if conveyed outside of the five senses. He tried to dismiss it with a bitter laugh and ordered a second sandwich, but the inchoate summons tugged stronger at his mind.

Dolly! It had to be Dolly. Otto had brought her back and they were waiting for him at home.

He paid his check and ran until he found a taxi. When he leaped out in front of his building, he saw that the living room lights were on. Suspense gagged him all the way up the stairs.

Somebody was waiting for him in the living room. But it wasn't Dolly. It was Eggy Glass, and Eggy was dead.

Eggy lay face down in a chaos of broken dishes and scattered cutlery, and the tablecloth was a tangled rag about his feet. In falling, a wild grab at the cloth had yanked it off the table. Between Eggy's shoulder blades there was a jagged rent of bloody material where a knife had been plunged and then withdrawn.

Greg fumbled his way to a chair and sat down and tried to light a cigarette. *What now?* he thought. *The police will not believe that I didn't murder him. And how is this connected with Dolly?* He had to use three or four matches before he could get the cigarette lit.

Feet were coming up the stairs—more than one pair. They moved up the hall and stopped in front of the door. There was a knock. Greg started to rise, trying to think and not able to.

The door opened and Lash Bogue and the Prof stepped in.

"Otto here yet?" Lash asked. "I—" He stopped dead, staring at the floor.

The Prof dropped down beside the body. "Knifed in the back," he said in that funereal voice of his. "He's turning cold."

Lash Bogue turned the deadly chill of his gaze on Greg. A shiver ran through Greg.

Lash said, "Why'd you do it?"

"I didn't."

"You were here all the time. We went in different directions after we left you, each of us working different angles. Otto told us to meet him here. Me and the Prof just met each other downstairs." Lash's mouth was a hairline. "It looks like Eggy was the first one here."

"Eggy's still wearing his red," the Prof said. "That means he trusted the killer. He never knew what was happening till the shiv slid into his back."

Greg wiped his brow. "Listen. I was walking the streets. When I left I forgot to lock the door. You saw just now that it was still unlocked. And why would I want to kill Eggy?"

"Yeah, why?" Lash Bogue grunted. "There's a lot screwy about this, and I got an idea I'm being played for a sucker."

The hall door swung gently inward, and Sergeant Vetter's beer-bellied form stood framed in the doorway. He looked at the body and smiled grimly. His gun slipped into his fist. The Prof's hand had started toward his shoulder,

but seeing it was too late, he changed his mind.

"That wasn't smart," Sergeant Vetter said. "Did you guys think this house wouldn't be watched? After I saw you come up, I thought I'd listen in at the door."

"I'm in the clear," Lash told him. "If you was watching, you saw me come up a minute ago. Eggy's cold."

"Cold, is he?" Vetter moved into the room. "I saw a lot from downstairs. I saw—"

He made the mistake of passing too close to Lash. The big gangster's fist was a blur of motion, and Vetter spun sideways, rocking. A gun appeared in the Prof's hand. He stepped behind Vetter and slashed the butt down on the base of his skull.

The sergeant crumpled to the floor without a sound.

Greg gawked. "You've killed him!" he muttered.

"Nuts!" the Prof said. "He'll wake up in a little while."

He stepped to the door, listening. There had been little sound; none of the tenants had been roused.

"Let's get out of here!" Lash said, grabbing Greg's arm. "We can't tell any story the coppers will believe. They'll fry the three of us."

Dully, Greg let Lash hustle him out of the apartment and down the stairs. In the street they scattered in three different directions.

AT THAT hour Eighth Avenue south of Fourteenth Street was practically empty of people. A police prowl car rolled slowly downtown. With pounding heart Greg crouched in a doorway. Sergeant Vetter could not yet have recovered consciousness and broadcast an alarm, but Greg could not afford the risk of being picked up—although the chance of reaching Dolly—Dolly alive or Dolly dead—was as tenuous as the vision in his brain.

It was the vision of a hammer. A hammer to bash somebody's head in. A hammer to nail up wooden crates.

He slipped along shadows. Stork's stationery store was closed for the night, like the rest of the occasional stores along the avenue. He peered through the glass door into the shadowy interior of counter and shelves and phone booth. He had known that he would be too late. It was now too late for anything.

His agitated fingers twisted the knob, and to his surprise the door gave. He stepped inside, closing the door noiselessly behind him. When he had moved half the length of the store, he noticed the thin line of light under the door to the back room. He scarcely breathed. Was there still time?

Remembering the little gun Otto had given him, he took it out. At the door he listened. There was no sound. He started to push the door in.

"You're covered," a quiet voice said. "Keep coming with your hands up."

Through the narrow opening of the door he could see a hand and a gun. He knew the voice. He kicked the door all the way in.

"So you're here, Otto?" he said.

Otto laughed with mirth. "I thought it was you, but I wasn't sure." He dropped the gun into his pocket.

But Greg kept his own gun tight in his hand. Past Otto, under the barred window, stood a large wooden crate in which toys had once been packed. Three crates like that had been piled one on top of the other against the wall, all of them nailed up and evidently full. Now there were only two against the wall, and the top boards of the third had been ripped off. The crate was empty. Near it on the floor lay the hammer which Greg had knocked off the counter a couple of hours ago.

On a cardboard box lay half a hundred cigarettes. Otto had slit a few of them open, and in each of them, covered by a thin layer of tobacco, was a slender capsule containing white powder.

Otto said, "This is where the dope was distributed. A dope fiend would ask for cigarettes and he would be sold a doctored pack. There could be a store full of customers and nobody would suspect. Smart, but the trouble with dope peddling is there are always too many people involved. Sooner or later one of them will give it away. That's how Jessup caught wise."

Greg kept staring at the empty crate. "How could Dolly have guessed what she was walking into when she came in here to phone me?" Greg whispered hollowly. "Mr. Stork heard her tell me she'd recognized the killer. A while ago I knocked the hammer off the counter. It meant something to me, but I couldn't understand what. Then a few minutes ago it came to me. A hammer to nail up a crate big enough for a person to fit into. That was the only way Dolly would have vanished so completely."

There was something frightening about Otto's face. It was all taut nerves quivering. "It took hardly any time," he said. "Knocking her out and dragging her into this back room. The crate was empty. Dump her in and nail it up and put it back with the others. Then go outside. In that hubbub, who'd notice that Stork hadn't been outside all along? And Stork plainly didn't murder Jessup, so why take the store apart, especially as the coppers suspected you and Dolly were pulling a fast one?"

Greg laughed wildly. "Twice I was in the store, and she was back here. Her weight made the crate heavy, and when the cops moved it they thought it was full of merchandise. Then, only a little while ago, when the street was deserted, they wrapped her in something and carried her out." Something stuck in his throat.

He added hoarsely, "To dispose of the body. Stork had hit her with the hammer. It was the handiest thing.

"Not the hammer," Otto said. "There's no blood in the crate or anywhere else. A hammer is messy; there would have been plenty of blood. Stork must have knocked her out with something like a rubber sap."

"Does it matter? He killed her later. He couldn't afford to let her live."

Otto said nothing. He looked to Greg like a man he had never known before—like a killer. This was the one side of Otto he had never seen. Greg's finger tightened on the trigger.

"How do you happen to be here?" Greg asked darkly.

"Didn't Eggy tell you?"

"Eggy is dead." Greg went on to tell how he had found the body; how Prof and Lash Bogue had come up; how they had knocked out Sergeant Vetter and fled.

Otto listened in stony silence, with blood draining from his lips. He looked at his feet. "Eggy was the one who got the line on where the dope was being peddled," Otto said. "He met me and gave me the lowdown. I told him to go to your apartment and bring you here. I had to make sure that this was the place and that Stork was really the guy. The store was closed when I got here. I picked the lock. I guess Eggy was overheard asking questions and getting an answer."

"And he was followed to my apartment."

"Not exactly followed. Because the killer didn't know that Eggy had seen me first. He figured Eggy would go to your apartment to meet me and thought he was shutting him up." Otto took out his gun, checked it and slipped it back into his armpit clip. "Where's a good place for you to lay low for an hour?"

"I'm going wherever you go," Greg said.

"There's going to be more killing, Greg. That's in my line."

"I'm going with you."

Otto looked at him. "I guess you're right."

THEY walked west, past Ninth Avenue, and stopped in front of a brownstone house.

"Stork lives in the basement, according to Eggy," Otto said. "Keep your rod handy."

Greg glanced around. A man and woman strolled toward them, arm in arm. Across the street the drunken laughter of a studio party enlivened the night. Two ten-wheeler trucks, on the way to the river docks, shook the pavement. It was all usual and familiar, yet death was part of the street also.

There was a separate entrance to the basement apartment, in a recess under the high flight of stone stairs. Otto was at the door, and the opaque light of a street lamp glistened momentarily on a narrow tool in his hand. Only the upper halves of the two basement windows were

above street level. Greg tried to peer through the Venetian blinds, but the slats were opened only wide enough to show that the interior was lit.

Otto had the door open. He pushed it in with his left hand, while his right hand poked out his gun. Greg stepped behind him. His palm was slimy with cold sweat.

They were in a hallway lit by a dim overhead bulb. A short distance ahead a splash of brighter light streamed through the door which led into the apartment. Otto paused, the taut line of his back eloquent of his alert senses. Then he was moving again toward the open door, almost inch by inch, it seemed to Greg, who was close at his heels.

Otto stopped at the doorjamb and slowly started to lean around it. Greg rose on his toes, looking over Otto's shoulder.

It was a large, expensively furnished studio room. A woman lay on a divan against the farther wall. Greg stared at the mass of brown curls and the rumpled housedress, hearing only his own harsh breathing. Her limbs were as stiff as a corpse.

Then she moved. Her head lifted from the cushion and turned toward the door; Greg saw the gag in her mouth and the ropes around her wrists and ankles.

"Dolly!" he cried, stepping around Otto and plunging into the room.

"Come back! Greg!"

Greg felt Otto grab him from behind. He was already well inside the room. He saw Dolly's eyes, enormous with horror, and he realized that his joy at finding Dolly alive had betrayed him into a frightful mistake.

From behind a high-backed chair Mr. Stork reared into view. His pinched face was a death's-head over which yellow skin was stretched. A long-barrelled revolver extended awkwardly from his right hand.

At the rear of the room somebody chuckled softly. The Prof stood there with two guns in his fists.

"Drop your gats," the Prof ordered.

Greg's little automatic clattered to the floor. His heart was flowing out of him with a sickening gush. He looked back at Otto, who looked like something carved out of wax.

"I'm a fool, Otto," Greg said tonelessly. "I should have let you come alone."

Otto smiled his smooth smile. He shifted his gun a couple of inches and fired.

The room shivered with a chaos of overlapping explosions. Greg saw Mr. Stork slide along the chair and die. He saw the Prof's left shoulder jerk and then the gun in his right hand belch flame. Greg dropped to his knees in a mad dive for his own gun.

Abruptly silence possessed the room, and a stinging smell of cordite. The street sounds became audible: a woman calling out in a high-pitched voice, a truck rumbling past, the party laughter across the street. Greg's hand at last felt the hard steel of his automatic.

"Let it stay, Greg!" the Prof ordered.

Greg, on hands and knees, raised his head, bitterly conscious of the fact that he had not acted fast enough. The Prof was standing rigid, gun steady in his right hand while his left arm hung limply at his side. He was listening to the voices in the street. Behind him Dolly had managed to sit up, and she too was listening with a kind of breathless concentration.

A woman in the street was saying, "I tell you, those were shots." A man's mocking voice replied, "Don't be a dope. That was a truck backfiring. You been seeing too many movies." And from the party across the street a drunk, who evidently was sticking his head out the window, yelled, "Bang! Bang! Hey, you down there, why don't you lay down? I shot you." There was a lot of laughter then.

THE Prof moved stiff-legged over to where Greg was kneeling and kicked the automatic under a couch. Greg thought, *I'm still alive because he doesn't dare risk another shot just now.*

The Prof went past Greg; Greg stood up and looked at the dead body of Mr. Stork and then around at Otto.

Otto was still on his feet, doubled over, with both hands clutched at his stomach. He started to straighten up, and there was blood on his gun and blood on the hand that still held it. Otto gripped the gun with both hands and, digging his teeth into his lip, tried to focus it on the Prof.

The Prof chopped at Otto's cheek with his gun and Otto reeled crazily, moaning a little, red trickling down to his collar. His fingers could no longer hold the gun. It dropped, and Otto sat down like a pile of empty clothes. The Prof picked up the gun.

Through pain and weakness Otto smiled up at the Prof. "You're lucky Dolly was in my line of fire. I had to be too careful. I always had an idea you were a rat."

"You had no business coming into this," the Prof said dolefully. "So what if I had a little dope business on the side? It didn't interfere with you." The Prof twisted his head. "Stay put, Greg!"

Greg kept moving to the divan. The Prof, he knew, would prefer not to shoot again if he could help it. Dolly's eyes were misty, devouring Greg. He put his arms about her and felt the trembling of her body.

The Prof watched them for a few moments, then turned back to Otto. "Dolly's the one caused all the trouble," he said bitterly. "Jessup

was coming to pick up Stork and maybe me. My tip said Jessup was working alone because he wanted all the credit for himself. Dolly saw me plug him, but it would have worked out okay because she went into Stork's store to make the phone call. Then Eggy had to find out too much. That wasn't bad either. I thought Greg would take a powder when he found the body and the cops would blame it all on him, figuring he was hiding out somewhere with Dolly. Why couldn't you let it ride that way, Otto?"

"You made the mistake of touching Dolly."

The Prof's teeth drew back from his gums. "All right, wise guy. You wrecked my little business and the cops will want me for conking that sergeant. Looks like I've got to lam. But you won't bleed to death, Otto. I'll finish you before that—and Greg." He glanced at Dolly almost wistfully. "And Dolly too. Now that the heat's on me and I have this wounded wing I can't take her with me."

"So that's why you let Dolly live?" Otto said between his teeth.

"What the hell, I'm human. I used to watch her while we played bridge. To her I was just another piece of furniture, except I knew how to bid and what cards to put down. Damn her! I'm flesh and blood."

Dolly was a small quivering bundle in Greg's arms, and Greg for the first time in his life knew a fierce desire to kill a man. But there were twenty feet between himself and the Prof, and the Prof's remaining good hand could use a gun with deadly effect.

ABRUPTLY Greg was aware of a newcomer in the room. Only the Prof had seen him enter, and the Prof wasn't greatly disturbed.

Lash Bogue was leaning indolently against the wall near the hall door. Both his hands were deep in his coat pockets.

"Quite a party you're having here, eh, Prof?" Lash Bogue said.

The Prof laughed nervously. "Otto caught wise to our little side business."

Otto squirmed around to Lash. "So Eggy was the only square shooter in the outfit. That's why you rats killed him."

"There was nice dough in it, which you were too yellow to pick up," Lash said. He smiled bleakly across the room at Dolly. "Hi, Dolly. Did they hurt you?"

It was a ridiculous question. What difference did it make now? But the question seemed to mean something to the Prof. Without apparent motion on his part, his gun came to rest on Lash.

"We couldn't have her spill to the coppers," the Prof said.

Lash pulled on his cigarette without removing his hands from his pockets. The smoke formed

twin streamers from his nostrils. "You lied to me, Prof. I asked you what happened to Dolly. You said Stork told her we'd get her and Greg if she opened up. You said she'd already spoken to Greg on the phone and she ran out of the store to try to stop him from talking to the cops. You said she missed him in the crowd and she beat it so the cops couldn't ask her questions. That would've been a good way to handle it, but it didn't happen that way at all."

"I didn't like the way you looked at me when you asked me about her," the Prof said, wetting his lips.

"You lied to me," Lash persisted. "You had ideas of your own about Dolly."

"So what? What's a dame between pals?"

Lash Bogue said nothing. He leaned against the wall and enveloped the Prof with the chill of his gaze. The Prof held his gun steady, waiting.

Then Greg took an impossible chance comprised of hunch and desperation and the knowledge that he was going to die anyway. He threw himself at the Prof across twenty feet of space. Before Greg had covered half the distance, the muzzle of the Prof's gun gaped hugely at him.

Calmly Lash Bogue pulled his gun out of his pocket and shot the Prof in the back of the head. Then he went to the door.

"So long, Dolly." Something thawed the ice in his eyes. "Lash Bogue, sucker," he said. He spat out his cigarette and ground it into the floor. "But I don't know. Dames never liked me, not even the tramps. They said I gave 'em the willies. But you invited me to your home and treated me like any other guy. The Prof said he used to know girls like you when he was young. Maybe. I never did and I guess I never will again. I felt good just being in the same room with you."

He set fire to a fresh cigarette and grinned down at Otto. "Guess I'm getting soft in my old age, eh?"

"Thanks, pal," Otto said.

"You hit bad?"

"It could be worse."

"Both of us getting soft, eh, Otto? Maybe we better get out of the rackety before somebody slaps our wrists." Lash Bogue waved a nonchalant hand. "So long, kids. Give Dolly a kiss for me, will you, Greg?" He turned and was gone.

Greg was on the divan, ripping the gag from Dolly's mouth. During the kiss they heard the street door open and close.

Then they heard Lash Bogue's voice outside, "Say, lady, did you hear a shot?"

"It's those trucks," a woman's voice replied. "They're always backfiring."

THE BEGGARS ON HORSEBACK

by . . . Curt Benson

CHAPTER ONE

Satan's Reprieve

CROPINGLY up the fog-ridden harbor, like some prehistoric creature fumbling its way home to die, the S.S. *Annapolis* limped through New York Bay. Bareheaded against the winter's chill and the clammy touch of the mist I stood on her weather-battered deck, pressed tight by the restless crowd. And what a crowd that was—a band of souls given up by the devil on some miraculous reprieve. Haggard, bedraggled and tattered—refugees who had been wandering years from their homeland, war orphans seeking bomb-safe school houses, survivors of shipwreck and internment like myself, newspapermen and diplomats.

Because the thought of Lorelei had burned stronger within me each hellish day of the seven months since I had walked out on her, I forced my way to the rail, right by the gangway.

And only then did I notice him—the man with the wooden leg and the patch over one eye.

A voice close to my ear had said, "Gotta match, bud?" and when I turned he was there. His face was scarred and ugly, and the shield for his eye socket was a filthy rag. He was dressed in tattered, nondescript clothing, and my first impression was—*here is Long John Silver stepped out of a book.*

He put a light to a twisted and dirty half cigarette, handed back the matches, and said, "Thanks, Mr. Harlow." His voice was low and rasping, like that of a fighter gone too often to the canvas.

I raised a puzzled eyebrow as he spoke my name.

"You're Jeff Harlow, ain'tya? The dancer?"

I nodded and turned away, puzzled now. Come to think of it, there was something vaguely familiar about the man—not his face so much, but his entire appearance.

And then it came to me. He was one of the men in the boat! I had noticed the speedboat as we had entered quarantine. I did not remember it well; I had seen it with the distracted

detachment of a man looking at the world, but absorbed only in his own thoughts.

But I recalled it now—the battered speedboat with the two men. One had hulked over the steering wheel, a vague figure in oilskins. The other—was Long John Silver!

But what was he doing here? And how had he gotten aboard the *Annapolis*, past customs and immigration officials?

I looked at him again. His one eye studied me unblinkingly, malevolently. I turned back to the rail and forgot him, thinking of Lorelei.

Would she be there at the pier? Sure. I hadn't written her, but I knew the newspapers had been heralding our return. She'd be there—if she had to crawl.

Because that was the way things had always been with Lorelei and me. It was always me for her and her for me—every inch of the way. That was what had driven me mad every day of those past seven months. Even that night the torpedo struck. . . . I remember the instant of explosion one word had torn up from my heart: *Lorelei!* And through the flaming, scream-ridden hell that had ensued I kept thinking—*What will become of Lorelei now?* And later, when I was debating whether to unlace the lifebelt, or to endure for a little longer the pain of the cold and the wet—because I never expected to be found by the lifeboat—then too I was thinking—*What will become of Lorelei now?*

With a boastful blare of their horns, the little tugs nosed the *Annapolis* in toward the slip. I strained my eyes through the mist—and suddenly the mass of the pier loomed before us. Dimly at first, and then more clearly, I could make out the crowd on the pier. Thousands of them—a little frightening to behold. There were news-reel cameras—a battery of them. Radio mikes. Even a band!

How could I find Lorelei in that swarm of people?

But I did!

She was off on the very end of the pier, alone, amidst bails and crates of every description. We passed close, but her searching eyes could not pick me out. I tried to yell—to call her name. But even I couldn't hear my cries against the noise.

And then I noticed her face—and the terror in it. I thought first it might be the fog, distorting my vision—but it was no mistake. That was stark horror mirrored on her face. She had always been pallid, yes—like something ethereal, something beyond this world—but now she was like an unbleached sheet. And her eyes! Like a hunted animal. Fear in them. Yes, and I saw a touch of madness there!

The boat drifted past her slowly. I squirmed in the crowd, wild with impatience. But there was nothing I could do. Next to me the crew was dismantling the railing to make way for the gangplank. I would be the first one off.

I turned again toward Lorelei. She was still there, at the end of the pier. Then I saw another face—a man's! Dark, thin, satanic! He was sidling around a packing case, edging toward her—unusually tall. Something seemed to warn her of his presence. She turned suddenly, and I could no longer see her face. But then she was fleeing, dodging behind a pyramid of bales—with the man after her. And I couldn't see them any more.

My watch said it was only five minutes, but it took hours until they set the gangplank in place. And all the while I clutched the rail frantically—helplessly. Once I thought I saw her duck behind a bulwark. I looked at the swarms of police, but they were taking care of the crowd, oblivious to what might be happening 100 feet down the end of the pier, amidst the high-piled freight.

I remembered Lorelei's face, and thought—*She's been through some kind of hell—and I knew it was going to happen!* Yes, I had known—and I had talked myself out of it with brave words. "Goodbye," I had said. "I'm sick of being a cheap three-a-day hoover and a dime-a-dozen chorus boy. I've got a duty to perform—something I owe humanity. And besides, you'll go a lot farther without being teamed to a punk like me. Your name will be in lights, kid. So long." And the next morning I had sailed, leaving her—tempting and helpless bait for every wolf on Broadway.

There was something about Lorelei that attracted trouble just as surely as the North Pole draws the compass needle. Trouble in the form of men. No, she didn't will it that way. She was just a sweet, unsophisticated kid—naïve. But she had a face . . . and a way of speaking . . . and a way of carrying her head. . . .

IT WASN'T until the gangplank was almost lowered and I was ready to dash off the ship that the one-legged man made his play.

I had completely forgotten him there at my side until I felt the pressure of a knife point at my back and heard him rasp, "Don't be goin' nowhere in a hurry, Mr. Harlow. This shiv can do a lotta damage easy."

The close-packed crowd around me began to shift as the first passengers debarked, I looked down on the pier; neither Lorelei nor her pursuer could be seen.

Long John muttered, "Inside, bud. And don't try any funny stuff in this crowd."

I hesitated, but a sudden pressure on the knife in my back prompted me to make my way to the companionway. We stepped into a small salon, now crowded with unmade cots that had been used to accommodate the overflow of passengers. There was no one else in there.

"We'll just stay here for a while," said the man at my back.

The knife point was still there, but I decided

to take a chance. I tensed and took a running dive forward. I landed flat on my stomach and slid a short way on the polished floor. I turned over on my back. Long John was charging—a vicious, hobbling figure. The knife flashed high—a six-inch blade!

I brought my feet up to my chest and then lashed out. I caught him square in the stomach. He went back, stumbling a few steps, then crashing to the floor.

The knife fell from his hand and he crouched against one of the cots, eyeing me like a trapped beast, waiting for my attack. But I didn't bother with him. I whirled and dashed for the farther exit of the salon.

I forced my way down the crowded gangplank, and at the bottom two men seized me. I tried to throw them off, and one of them was shoving a mike in my face. I saw we were on a raised platform, people gazing at us.

Someone was saying, ". . . a member of the British-American Ambulance Corps, Mr. Jeffrey Harlow, who went down with the *Star of the North* off the Azores. Mr. Harlow, would you care to tell us something about the concentration camp they held you—Mr. Harlow!"

But I was off that platform and crashing my way through the crowd. I had seen something—near the entrance to the pier.

I cleared the crowd and saw the car—big and black. They were stuffing Lorelei into it. I broke into a sprint.

I saw the little boy dart out from behind the pillar, but I was going too fast to do anything about it. We collided. I went headlong, he sprawling.

I was getting hurriedly to my feet when the little boy said, "Next time, bo, look where you're goin'."

The voice of a full-grown man!

I whirled around to face him, but he was sprinting off into the crowd.

When I got to West Street, the black car was gone. I sprang into a cab.

"That car in front of you—did you see where it went?"

The cabby peered down the heavily trafficked street. "Don't see it now. Couldn't have gone far in this traffic. Must've turned off on Fifty-fourth."

We took a left on Fifty-fourth. Couldn't see it. Down to Twelfth Avenue—Eleventh. No luck. Lorelei was gone!

I SEARCHED for her. God, how I searched for her. I checked on her bookings, took a tour of a dozen cities up-state where she had been billed. Back to New York. I spoke to a thousand people . . . people who had worked with her, people who knew her well, people who didn't know her at all. For a full week I searched—and the trail ran cold at a rooming

house where she had lived until six days before the *Annapolis* came into port.

Yeah, I went to the police. They took my story and filed it with the Bureau of Missing Persons. Then they told me to forget it.

Forget it!

"Look," I cried, "she was kidnapped, I tell you. I saw it happen. She's in danger. Anything might be happening to her right now!"

"Kidnapped!" the sergeant snorted. "In front of three thousand people? Look, Johnny, we can't start a man hunt every time some Romeo changes his mind about a gal he gave the gate. You haven't been in touch with this babe for seven months. You come back, and because she isn't waiting at the pier for you, you start shouting crime wave."

"But she was at the pier," I protested. "I saw her. I—"

"Okay, bud, okay," he said wearily. "We'll look for her. Leave your name and address. We'll notify you if she turns up. Good-by."

So, after seven days of fruitless search, half crazy with fear, amazed how a person could be so completely swallowed up by the city, I was licked. If I had the slightest lead I would have followed it to hell and back. But I had nothing—absolutely nothing.

So that night, lonely and empty inside, not knowing what to do, I wandered into a bistro in the lower Forties. I was halfway through my third beer when I saw Tom Jones.

Tom was one of those guys who always has a drink in his hand, but never seems to get more than half drunk. He had been a news photographer at one time—the best in the business, they said. Every once in a while he'd go out and do a couple of free-lance jobs. "Whenever the profession stands in need of me," he would say. He meant—whenever his credit ran out at his favorite bars.

But Tom Jones was wise in the ways of New York, so I brought my beer over to his table and asked him if he had seen Lorelei.

"Lorelei," he said a bit thickly, but obviously delighted to have an attentive ear. "Ah, Lorelei. A beautiful girl." Then his voice drifted off as he whispered, "Too beautiful."

I looked sharply at him. Those half-closed eyes were more perceptive than people might expect.

But Tom Jones couldn't help me. He hadn't seen Lorelei in three months.

He asked if I had gone to the police, and I told him what they had said.

He shook his head understandingly. "The police! A fat lot they know!" He waved a hand, as though stilling the objections of a throng around him. "Oh, sure, they do their job when a murder they should have prevented in the first place takes place right under their noses. But what do they know of all that goes on in this city? Why, I could tell you stories of

sin and crime and depravity in this city that the police never even suspected—never heard of, because the people concerned are the thousands whom nobody gives a damn about."

The old boy was off on a favorite theme. I started to rise. But where would I go? To my room—to go mad thinking of Lorelei? I ordered another beer.

Tom Jones was saying "... why, the police don't know anything about the underworld. I mean the real underworld—the half world, the shadow world, the people who have to live in darkness." His eyes took on a feverish light as he warmed to his subject. "You don't for a minute think that this town is as shiny and clean as it looks when you walk its streets. What of the diseased, the demented? What of the human aberrations? Normal brains with bodies that are physical mistakes. Normal bodies with brains that mock nature's handiwork. What do the police know of these? But I'll tell you where to go, if you would learn of the nether world. By the Brooklyn docks there's a gray-haired slattern named Susie. She could tell you a story. And there's Tim, the blind beggar who sits on a curbstone in East New York. Or you can find a man named Willie, who has a soft voice and smokes a sweet-smelling pipe in a Chinese antique shop on Mott Street."

But I was not interested in Tom Jones' fancies. I just wanted to find Lorelei. So I left the old booze-hound philosophizing into his cups and went out into the soft snowfall.

I WALKED then—just because there was nothing else to do. I wandered around the bright spots—the places I used to go with Lorelei. And the bright spots were haunted by our ghosts. A dozen times I could hear her voice in the traffic. I could see her standing in front of Sardi's, where we used to meet—or entering Angelo's, where we liked to drop in after a late show.

That was why, when I actually did see her, I had to stare for seconds before I realized that it was not just a vision this time.

At first all I noticed was she. The way she carried her head, the soft blonde hair that puffed out from beneath the silk scarf—hair crusted lightly with new-fallen snow. Then I was aware of the crowd pouring out of the theater. Aware of the coat that kept winter away from her body. Mink! A dream in mink. But where did she—?

And then I saw him! Yes, the man of the docks. Dark, evil, tall. I suddenly realized how very tall he was when he impulsively bent and kissed the top of her hair. I used to kiss her impulsively like that too—but on the forehead.

And then I saw the way she was holding on to him, and my soul was chill. She clutched his arm with both of hers, as though that were all she had in the world to cling to.

I elbowed through the crowd and confronted her. Through dry lips I called her name.

"Lorelei!"

She turned and looked at me.

But she didn't see me!

She stared at me as though I were a total stranger. Then she turned, and he and she stepped into the big black car which a chauffeur had just driven up. I stood there agape, too stunned to move.

But as they drove away I was suddenly galvanized into action. I hailed a cab, told him to follow them.

We didn't have to travel far, but for that entire ride I thought about the way she looked at me. Her eyes! It wasn't that she had failed to recognize me, but there was something dead in those eyes, as though the spirit—the spirit that was Lorelei herself—had fled the body.

It was on a crosstown street east of Broadway that the car pulled up. I went past and instructed the driver to stop half a block away.

By the time I had paid off the cabbie, Lorelei and her escort had entered a small but handsome apartment building in the middle of the block.

I strolled past the building on the other side of the street, hoping to see a light go on in one of the front windows. I retraced my steps—still no lights. I studied the building hastily. It looked very modern. I counted nine stories. At the very top, outlined against the moonlit clouds I could dimly make out plant boxes on the wall of a pent house roof garden.

I crossed the street toward the building. The name on the canopy said, *Regis Arms*. I didn't know just what I was going to do, but I knew Lorelei was in the building and in danger. I had to get in.

I strode boldly under the canopy toward the lighted lobby—but I didn't get past the doorman. He was a hulk of a man, dressed in polished livery.

"Who do you want to see?" he growled.

I waved my hand loftily. "Oh, don't bother announcing me. I'm expected."

He grabbed my wrist, jerked me back. "You ain't expected here, bud."

I said, slightly desperate, nodding to the house phone. "I'm a friend of Miss Gentry. Tell her I'm here."

His eyes narrowed. He said suspiciously, "I don't know no Miss Gentry."

There was menace in his tone, but I tried to show no notice of it.

I said, "You know—the lady who came in a short while ago with the tall gentleman."

"No one's come in here in the last half-hour," he said slowly.

"But they did," I protested. "Five minutes ago. I saw them!"

His voice was a deep-throated mutter. "You're looking for trouble."

I tried to reason with him. "Now, see here, I—"

"Beat it, chump," he whispered tightly.

There was a gun in his hand.

I backed out of the lobby and started walking toward Broadway—fast!

By the time I reached the corner I could feel the chill of my sweat-soaked clothes. I stood there, not knowing what to do next. Scared to go back? Sure. Dead scared. But I knew I had to. I looked up hopefully at a passing police car. But that was no good; I was trying to crash a private house, where I had no legal right.

I went into an all-night delicatessen and bought two bottles of milk. I asked him to put them in a big bag. Then I took off my hat and coat and told the bewildered storekeeper I'd be back for them.

I WALKED back down the block, hugging the shadows on the other side of the street. I got past the lobby safely; the doorman was inside. When I had passed the building I crossed. On the iron gate to the alley that ran alongside the building was the sign—*Delivery Entrance*. I strode down there boldly and entered the lighted doorway at its end. Two hard-looking men were playing casino.

One of them called, "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I got a package—"

"I can see you got a package. Leave it here. Who's it for?"

"Penthouse," I said stubbornly. "It's important. I gotta take it up myself."

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Let's see what's in it."

He grabbed the package from my hands. He opened it and then looked in.

"Two bottles of milk. Important huh?"

I didn't wait for him to start anything. I seized one of the bottles and swung.

He had time to get his head out of the way, and the thing crashed against his shoulder. I raised it again, and was conscious of a form coming at me from behind.

And a bolt of lightning crashed against my head.

Distant voices . . . words coming through a fog without meaning . . . madly spinning walls . . . then slowly contorting walls . . . a hell of a headache!

Then I came to in a flash and sat bolt upright. The guy I had hit was rubbing his shoulder—cursing me.

Then I noticed my wrists—handcuffed! I looked around wildly—and terror was swept away by the flood of relief. Behind me—two cops.

"Boy, am I glad to see you fellows!"

One of them smiled. "Sure. Like Lee was glad to see Grant."

The other was tough. "Okay, sonny boy. On your feet. We got an appointment."

They grabbed me then, under the shoulders, jerked me to my feet.

The tough one cuffed me on the back of the head. "Get goin'."

Then I got the picture. They were running me in!

Protest? . . . Did I!

I tried to tell those cops they were all wrong; that they had to crash into that building with me; that we had to rescue Lorelei.

Did you ever speak to a stone wall? Well, maybe my story did sound a little mad.

They started dragging me away, and all at once I knew that if I didn't crash into the building now, I never would. I went crazy, I guess. After I smashed the cuffs into one cop's face, I don't remember exactly what happened. From the way I looked the next day it must've been a hell of a fight. I was seeing everything through a red haze, and then I was conscious that I was crying—in pain. Someone had a grip on my hair, trying to pull it out by the roots. The tough cop was slapping my face while the other held me. He slapped deliberately, methodically—right . . . left . . . right . . . left . . .

I went along—peacefully. I remember they had to half carry me out the alley; my own legs had too much rubber in them to do the job.

They walked me to the corner. I was sure they were gonna book me, but they didn't.

The tough one said, "We should lock you up, buddy, but we'll give you a break. But make sure you stay away from that apartment building. Maybe you do have a girl friend there, but if she don't want to see you, stay away. Next time we won't be so easy on you."

Then they turned and walked back down the block. I tried to walk. I was lucky to get as far as the traffic light stanchion. I clung there and hailed a taxi to take me home.

CHAPTER TWO

The Darkened Windows

ALL that night I tossed on a bed of pain and anguish. Even if my battered body might have yielded to sleep, my tortured brain would not. I tried to be coldly analytical, to reason the thing out logically, but my problem defied reason. Lorelei—abducted in broad daylight before thousands of people . . . my failure to get the aid of the police . . . the completeness with which she had vanished, leaving no trace . . . and then seeing her tonight—and her not knowing me—and clinging like an adoring slave to him whom she had fled in terror a week before . . . and that house of mystery—with an armed doorman who denied what my eyes had seen. An impenetrable fortress into which the trail I was following entered, but which balked me cold.

A crazy set-up? Was it any wonder I suspected my own sanity? The whitecaps of bitter thought beat on tumultuously against my fevered brain.

The dawn-streaked sky was showing outside my window when I finally fell into a fitful sleep. I dreamed I saw Lorelei. She was standing right before me, arms outstretched, calling to me. I rushed toward her, but ran into a glass wall—a wall that became opaque at my touch. I drew back then and could see that she was encased in a glass cubicle, completely shut off from me. But she was not there alone. With her was something—a force black and malignant—a thing with sucking tentacles that reached for her, ensnared her. Futilely I beat my hands against the sides of her prison. But with each touch the wall would become opaque. In panic I would race around to the next side . . . and each time I would see her, she would be more inextricably in the toils of the monster. I suddenly seemed to have a gun. I aimed at the monster and fired. And I could see the bullet crush itself against the opaque glass wall.

I awoke in a fit of trembling. I was chilled to the bone, my pajamas clinging icily to my soaking wet back. I looked with relief at the sunlight pouring into the room.

The clear light of morning dispelled terror and brought new reason. I dressed and went out to study the barrier that blocked my way—the apartment house of my previous night's encounter.

IN DAYLIGHT the house appeared even more strange. Like a sapphire set in brass it stood uncomfortably among the smudgy, antiquated garages and loft buildings.

I didn't feel the cold at first, as I lay full-length against the sloping fire wall that surrounded the flat roof of the garage. The *Regis Arms* was directly across the street. As I lay there, my feet touching the level of the roof, my body flush with the 45-degree slope, and my head just clearing the top of the wall, I had a full view of the entire building. It hadn't been hard attaining my point of vantage. The dim, dust-covered stairway lay in the dark at the rear of the garage, and the attendants had all been busy in front, taking cars up and down in the two huge freight elevators fronting on the street. The garage consisted of four high-walled lofts, and from the roof my eyes were just about level with the sixth story of the *Regis*.

I reached a hand into the pocket of my overcoat, which I had retrieved from a puzzled delicatessen proprietor. I pulled out the cheap pair of binoculars I had picked up in a Sixth Avenue pawn shop and I studied the building before me.

Hours passed. At one P.M. I disgustingly pushed my cramped body away from the slope and trod heavy-hearted around the roof, slapping

my arms around my body to ease the numbness. But the numbness of my body was as nothing compared to the cold piece of lead that hung at my heart. I hadn't known what to expect when I began this vigil; had only tried it because I could think of nothing better to do, but it was all so fruitless. Even under the close scrutiny of the glasses, the house appeared to be in perfect order. There wasn't a—

Perfect order—that was it! *Too perfect!*

I remembered—the windows! Each one had come under the scrutiny of my glasses; each one I had cursed. They had given me nothing. Behind each were hung unyielding Venetian blinds—light-repelling lengths of wood, hanging full-length, each drawn closed to keep out prying eyes. Yes, each one the same. Nine floors of windows—and each shielded! To keep the world from seeing into that building? . . . Or perhaps to keep those within from gazing outward . . . ?

That people lived in the house I knew, I had seen them enter and leave. Not many . . . in fact, as I thought about it, that too seemed strange. Less than a score of people had entered or left the building since I had been watching. Less than a score, a building of that size—with a doorman in constant attendance. And as I thought about the people I had seen pass through that doorway, they seemed to assume new importance. I tried to recall each one. Almost all had been women. There was something else about them I had been trying to recall—something strange that I had felt, but could not put my finger on. Then I had it—and cast it away as meaningless. It was the clothes they wore . . . mink, sable—nothing but the finest. Was it strange to find such furs in an exclusive apartment house? No-o-o. But it was the women who wore them. . . . Did I imagine that they were hardly the type accustomed to wearing fine clothes? Even from six stories, my glass had told me the type—hard women, all of them—dissipated, cheap and tawdry. I thought of the chorus line of the Gaiety Burlesque.

I had no appetite as I munched on the soggy sandwiches I had brought. What did it all mean? My head was whirling. I couldn't make it add up. But I wasn't ready to quit yet. I had sworn to keep my vigil for an entire day. I went back to my post against the slope.

THE afternoon wore on, overcast and dully cold. As dusk gave way to early night, it began to snow—soft, thick flakes about me, filling the dark path of vision between me and the house I watched.

I got to my feet in despair. Wooden feet, wooden legs, numb from that long session in the cold. It was slightly warmer now that it was snowing, and the pain came back to my fingers; they had been blessedly numb for several hours.

I walked briskly around the roof of the garage

—only to become more acutely conscious of my discomfort. I went back to the slope of the front wall. Already it was coated with a blanket of white. I let myself fall against its soft wetness. I blinked the crust of snow from my lids and squinted through the night.

And for the first time I detected signs of life behind the impenetrable bulwark across the street. The lights had come on. Softly they showed around the sides of the blinds. A warm, barely noticeable luminescence seemed to seep out between the slats, showing the bricks of the building a faint red in the night.

Gone was the pain in my fingers, forgotten the bone-chilled ache of my legs. I brought my glasses to my eyes, scanned the windows.

But that wasn't much good. Other than indicating the presence of life behind those windows, the gaps in the blinds were too small to enable me to see beyond them.

A half-hour, an hour I stuck it out in the dark and the wet and the cold.

It was still snowing when a burst of light leaped out from a window on the ninth floor. The blind hadn't been raised, but it was as though it were being pushed aside. The hole of light changed from one shape to another as the blind seemed to be twisted, and at first I thought there must be a struggle there. Then the light got wider—and was being blocked off.

I swept the glasses to my eyes. What was emerging from that window? The falling snow and the dark made it difficult to see. I refocussed the binoculars. I couldn't be sure. It was hazy. I used my fingers to wipe the snow from my lenses. . . . And then I was sure—and I was suddenly hot, feverish, as my eyes riveted on what I saw.

I could make out a head emerging from the window—and then a pair of broad shoulders. Hands reached out, fumbled along the wall. I couldn't see the rope, but that's what it must have been. Then, one hand pulling over the other, the figure emerged—the shoulders, hunched as the arms drew them upward—the torso—and then . . . that was all!

For a moment it clung there, free of the window, arms extended overhead grasping the rope. Little figure—almost as broad as long. Truncated, ridiculous little figure. I didn't laugh; I didn't feel the rims of the glasses cutting into my eye sockets.

I watched that figure move upward against the wall, hand over hand; and I couldn't see the rope. . . . A creature of nightmare!

I didn't breathe.

Then the figure seemed to let go of the rope, to clutch the top of the wall. The head rose over the top, between two of the window boxes atop the wall that surrounded the penthouse. The head seemed to pause there, as though watching or listening. Then the shoulders rose. Then

the rest of the body, and it was over and down on the other side, behind the penthouse wall.

I waited; it didn't reappear. I put down the glasses and lay there, gasping. I clapped my hands to my head. My brain seemed about to burst. Pain and dizziness—a hundred mad thoughts and crazy half-formed fears gyrating in a mad whirl through my skull!

I said aloud, "Lord, what's it about? *What the hell is it all about?*"

I didn't leave the roof then. I didn't leave until almost an hour later—not until after the legless creature had bobbed over the penthouse wall again to clamber swiftly down the rope and back into the ninth floor window; not until, five minutes after that, two figures appeared in the doorway down in the street below. I saw them clearly, framed in the light from the lobby behind them—Lorelei and the tall one!

I FLED that barren, hateful roof and raced downstairs. I burst upon the street, and the roar of midtown traffic that broiled around me was like the shock of a cold shower driving the cobwebs of fright from a nightmare-tormented brain. The panic departed, and I felt I could think clearly again.

It was a one-way street, going away from Broadway. Traffic was halted at the corner, waiting for a green light. I thought I could make out a big, black, chauffeur-driven car making the turn uptown.

On a wild hunch I turned toward Broadway, hurried to the corner, and plowed uptown for a block. And there I waited. Crosstown traffic was slow; if they had gone around the block to get back to Broadway, I might have beaten them to the corner.

I did. The big car came along less than ten seconds later, caught the light and headed uptown on Broadway. I hopped into a cab and told the driver to tail them. He did—to a place in the Fifties. It was called the Gondolier Club. Lorelei and the tall one went inside.

I paid the cabbie and followed them.

But only as far as the door.

The doorman ushered a couple in formal wear past me, and said, "I'm sorry, sir. This is a private club. For members only."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came forth. *I wasn't going to let them stop me this time!*

"I'm a friend of a member," I said. "I was told—"

"Perhaps you have a guest card then?"

"Guest card? Sure." I fumbled through my pockets, conscious that I was putting on a very bad act. "Funny, I must have forgotten it."

The fellow smirked. "Too bad, sir. Won't you please step out of the doorway? You're blocking the way."

But I stood right there. "Look, I've got to get in. I've an important message for that party that just went in. I tell you—"

The doorman had jerked his head, and two men had materialized from nowhere. Men in dinner jackets—big men—on either side of me. I was escorted to the street—without my feet touching the ground. They deposited not gently near the curb.

One of them said, "And stay out!" Then they disappeared inside.

I just stood there—for minutes—seething with futile rage.

I T WAS more than an hour later. There was a crowd leaving the Gondolier Club. I left the doorway I had waited in and started crossing the street. Then I saw them

Lorelei!

My heart was a lump of pain in my throat at the sight of her. In ermine tonight. A vision—on the arm of the dark-faced man.

I rushed toward them. Would she fail to know me? This time I'd make her know me.

I brushed through the crowd toward her—but never got there.

At the other side of the doorway, beyond the area of light and gaiety that flowed out of the Gondolier Club, I saw him—the legless beggar!

I stood stock still, staring at him. He was seated on a little wooden platform—a platform that had a small wheel in each corner. Hands that were huge and bony were wrapped around two curved blocks of wood which he used to propel himself, by pushing against the pavement.

Was this the legless creature of the *Regis Arms*? Somehow I knew he was. And then I was sure. Sure when I caught the look in his eyes as he gazed after the departing car. A look of lustful adoration—and deeper, a look of bitter hate.

As the car drove away, he wheeled about on his platform and started off with astounding speed. I hastened after him, catching only occasional glimpses of him through the crowd which, although it held me back, seemed to trouble him not at all. He turned a corner—and when I got there he was gone.

I suddenly remembered I had seen him before—many times—without realizing it. I hurried off in search of Tom Jones.

I PICKED up Tom Jones' trail at the third bar I stopped in, but it was an hour before I finally caught up with him.

He was more inebriated than usual, but still sober enough to remember to ask whether I had found Lorelei. I told him no.

Then I asked him about the legless beggar, and he knew whom I meant immediately.

"That'sh Valentine," he said. "You've sheen 'im aroun' a hundred times. Can't miss 'im if you hang roun' Times Shquare. That'sh 'is dishtrict. Broadway up to Forty-seventh, Forty-eighth. I dunno. Yep, that'sh Valentine. . . . The Prinsh of the Beggars."

"Prince of the beggars?"

"That's right. That's what I call him. Cause he's the top man." Tom Jones looked at me owlishly. "Mos' people don' know it, but mos' the beggars in town belong to a organization—sort of a union. They take all the territory and divvy it up. Prevents competition. Gives every man a monopoly. An' Valentine is kingpin—Times Square is his—"

"I'd like to speak to him," I said. "Do you know where he lives?"

Tom shrugged. "I guesh 'e lives—I don' know—wherever it is that beggars live, I shuppose." Then he raised a finger and wagged it back and forth in front of his eyes. "But Valentine won't shpeak to you. He don't shpeak to anyone—not even me. Every beggar on the main stem I know. They all shpeak to me. But not Valentine. He is the original clam. He don't say more than a word to anybody, ever."

Jones regarded me quizzically. "But why do you—?"

That's all I heard, because I was already on my way to carry out my next move. No more sitting back. For the first time I was going to carry the campaign to the enemy.

CHAPTER THREE

Ride, Beggar, Ride!

THE blind beggar with the stringy gray hair tapped his way slowly to the corner of Forty-fifth Street. As the press of people tightened about him, the battered old hickory cane ceased its measured beat on the pavement. Slowly he drifted with the current of Broadway humanity as it massed broodingly behind the dam of crosstown traffic.

The light changed, and the dam burst—and the bent figure in dark glasses was swept along with the surging crowd. The slight pause of those around him seemed to warn him of the curb. Carefully he stepped off. Relying still on the mob around him, he boldly navigated the crossing and continued uptown, the measured beat of his cane clearing an avenue before him with its tap . . . tap; tap . . . tap; one to the front, one to the side. And the beggar wondered if the simulated deftness with which he grouped his way would be convincing to the sharp eyes that were following his laborious route uptown.

Yeah—the blind beggar was I.

The get-up must have been pretty convincing—good enough to keep the tin cup I held in my left hand busy. It really wasn't very hard for a guy who spent his whole life in front of the footlights.

I tried not to show that I was aware of Valentine. I knew he had picked me up at Forty-third, was following me. I wanted desperately to half turn my head—in a casual sort

of way—to see if he were still trailing me, but I forced my face straight ahead. If he suspected I was aware of him, it would spoil everything.

It was at Forty-ninth that he came up with me. For an entire block I was conscious that he was right behind me. I could hear the soft grinding of his wheels against the pavement. He was rolling along almost at my heels. I feigned ignorance of his presence, tried to continue along as I had been doing. But I knew those black, piercing eyes were studying me—my every movement. I tried hard to play my part perfect, but my tapping lost its rhythmic beat, and I had to strain to keep my feet to their snail's pace. I could feel the sweat break out on my face and I hoped it wouldn't streak the grease paint.

Then, at the corner, he spoke to me. First I felt something slapping my knee. I moved on, as though it were something I had brushed against. Then I felt it again. I paused, but did not look down. I thought, *What the hell would a real blind man do in a case like this?*

I turned, as though to face someone right at my side, and tried to make my face a question mark.

His voice came from near my hip—sharp, clear. "I want to talk to you."

I pretended to look down in the direction of the voice, then looked up, still playing bewildered.

"Don't try to bluff me, bud," he said. "I can spot a phony a mile off." His voice was hard—but not unpleasant.

I saw I couldn't get away with the masquerade. I decided to play it differently.

I said gruffly, "So I'm not blind. So what?" "So you and me are going to have a talk."

And since a talk with Valentine was the thing I wanted most at that moment, I shrugged and moved off with him down the side street.

In an empty doorway that was veiled with early dusk we halted. We faced off and sized each other up. I felt his gaze strip me naked of my disguise, but I was too interested in him to worry about that.

I was somehow amazed to see his face. Not the ugly, distorted symbol of abnormality I had expected. Not at all. It was a hard face, yes, with a large mouth that was formed in a tight, straight line. He had an adamant jaw, an aquiline nose flared at the nostrils, and a high brow. His hair was black, long and thick. Too much of it. It flowed down his neck like a lion's mane. But the outstanding feature was his eyes. They were deepest under coarse, black bushy eyebrows, yet the lashes were as long and delicate as those of a Follies girl. The pupils, nearer to black than any other color, seemed live things, aglow with intelligence—with power.

He spoke low, dangerously. "A stranger to the big town, bud?"

I said "Maybe. What if I am?"

He grew suddenly hard. "Because if you are, you got plenty to learn. If you aren't—" He clenched a huge, clawlike hand—"you're going to be sorry. . . ."

I said defiantly, "Cut the hocus-pocus and speak your piece. I just rolled into town, and what's it to you?"

"This is the big time, bud. And we do things in a big way—which is something you gotta learn—in fact there are a couple of things you gotta learn—like keepin' your nose out of other folks' territory—especially mine."

"And if I don't. . . .?"

His voice dropped a tone. "The harbor police pick up lots of unidentified bodies floating in the bay."

I looked at him without answering.

That must have been what he wanted for he went on in a gentler tone. "You see, we've got this city layed off in territories. That way nobody interferes with anyone else, an' we all make out better."

I shrugged. "Maybe that's okay. But I want you to get one thing straight. Nobody tells me what territory I can or can't work. If you guys got a fair system, I'm willing to be regular and play ball. But just remember two things. I gotta get my share—and don't try to rough me up. I don't scare easy."

The straight mouth turned up a little at the corners. "You're okay, bud. You're spunky and that's a thing I like."

I asked him about a territory. He said he'd figure out a good one, for me to meet him tomorrow.

He started to roll away, when I said, "I wish I could find a decent place to hole-up. Got any ideas that will help me?"

He regarded me intently for a moment, then shook his head. "That's your business, bud."

I said, "I wish you'd give me a tip. I don't know anything about this burg."

He was silent for a long moment. He smiled faintly, as though to himself. His face was twisted sardonically, but his voice was soft as he said, "If wishes were horses, then beggars could ride, couldn't they?"

I studied his face for a second, then said, "But beggars mounted run their horses to death."

I never saw as sudden a change in a human face. It softened immediately, became alive with new interest. He intoned lowly, "*King Henry The Sixth*, part three, act one, scene four." His keen eyes bored into mine. "You know Shakespeare?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I know Shakespeare."

"And Shelly and Byron?"

I nodded. "And Keats and Wordsworth and Dryden and Pope."

An indescribable look of pleasure mingled with the amazement on his face—amazement that could be no less than my own.

"This is wonderful," he breathed. "Wonderful."

Then his eyes narrowed. "You got an education. What are you doin' on the bum?"

I snapped at him, "You're no dummy yourself."

"But you've got a pair of legs!"

I turned my head away. "Forget it," I muttered. "Let's say I like this business."

His voice was normal again. "Sure, it's none of my business." Again he was studying me closely. Then he asked softly, "Say, did you ever peddle snow?"

I took a blind stab, and said, "Sure. For six months once in Chi."

He said slowly, "Care to carry a little here?"

I smiled. "It'd be worth my while, wouldn't it?"

His mouth twisted in a broad, almost boyish grin.

He said, "You don't have to look for a room. Come along with me."

"Sure," I said. "Where are we headin' for?"

He smiled. "You're gonna ride, beggar—like you never rode before."

WE WENT down Broadway then for several blocks, me groping my way down one side of the street, him traveling the other. We met at a corner below Times Square, and he led me down the darkened street east of Broadway.

We passed the old Royale Theater and stopped in the shadow beyond. Valentine twisted his head around, looked up and down the street. Then he seemed to dart toward a deeper blackness barely noticeable between the black walls of two buildings. It was an alleyway, leading to the stage door of the theater. A heavy iron gate extended across the passage. It was thick with rust to my touch.

I could barely discern the blob of blackness that was Valentine. He seemed to be fumbling with a padlock—and then the gate swung backward from my hand—on noiseless hinges.

Valentine locked a hand around my wrist and tugged me inside. Then I heard the click as the gate swung home, then the snap of the lock.

We groped our way through the darkness, and then I knew the true horror of the blindness I had been simulating. I was wondering about the old Royale. Everyone in show business knows about it. Massive, ornate, built by another, more lavish generation, it had been closed, sealed like the tombs for a quarter of a century. *The Royale* I thought. *The house of flops*. For it had been a hard-luck theater ever since the day it was built. Five workmen, they say, died in its construction. The first show produced there closed after a week, a miserable failure. Two other shows opened there that year; one ran two nights, the other three. In the ten years that followed, half a score of productions had graced its mammoth stage. None had run more than a month. Stage people aren't

more suspicious than most, but no one had dared stage a show at the Royale since. Off the beaten track now, the theater was forgotten—except as a legend of show business.

A tug on my arm drew me up short. I extended my hand, felt the massive door. I heard Valentine knock once—then twice more.

A shaded, indigo light glowed dimly from the wall at my side. I saw a peep-hole in the door slide back, but I could not see within.

A gruff voice said to Valentine, "Who the hell's that guy?"

"He's all right. Open up."

The voice within was dubious. "I don't know. I didn't get an okay from Regis on any newcomers."

Valentine's voice dropped a tone, was tighter. "I don't give a damn whether you've got an okay or not. I said open up."

For a moment there was silence, and in the gloom I could feel the pressure of the two wills in combat. Finally the door swung back and we entered into a dark room. The door closed and a light went on—and I saw the guardian of the gate.

I noticed her size first—six feet, and broad as a Fordham guard. Then I saw the cigar, half-smoked, clenched in her teeth. She was studying me slowly, insolently, from shoetips to fedora.

Valentine said, "Bella, this is Bill Marlin. You better know him, because he'll be coming here regular from now on."

Bella grunted and held out her right hand.

We shook hands and she said, "Nice to meetcha bud." I winced under the pressure of her grasp.

We walked down a narrow, dimly lit corridor. The corridor made several sharp turns before my eyes became accustomed to the dimness. Then I noticed the doorways set about ten feet apart on both sides. We passed one door that was open, and I got a flash view of a brightly lit cubicle. A man and woman were seated on a cot, playing cards. Neither of them was more than three feet tall.

My mind suddenly raced to that day at the pier—the little boy who had tripped me up—the little boy with the voice of a grown man. Was I on the track at last? I tried to still the quickened beat of my heart.

The corridor twisted, an unchanging labyrinth. I wondered who or what lay behind each of those many doors.

At last we neared the end of that passage. About fifty feet ahead I could see what appeared to be a broad flight of stairs, leading upward. The sound of angered voices reached us distantly through one of the closed doors just ahead. A moment later a door at my side swung open releasing a sudden flood of light, and a figure lurched drunkenly out and right into me. We both stumbled to the opposite wall.

A liquor-coated voice from within the room had said, "Scratch me, will you, you little wild-cat! I'll break your neck!"

I looked quickly at the girl huddled against the wall—dull-eyed, scared. I turned suddenly to look upon the figure that had lurched into the doorway.

I had seen that odd-shaped head before, the hairy face, the vicious, snarling mouth. On a poster outside a Coney Island side show. And the words—*Bozo, the wolf-faced boy!*

The creature stopped in surprise at the door, as though blocked by the intensity of my stare. Then he seemed to cringe back behind a suddenly raised shoulder that did not succeed in blotting his face from my view—and his eyes were those of a whipped cur. He drew back inside and slammed the door. I stared at the panel open-mouthed until Valentine tugged impatiently at my sleeve. I walked after him slowly, without a second glance at the woman, snivelling in the passageway.

We came to the stairway—five steps leading to a small platform with what seemed to be an elevator door at the far end.

Valentine pressed the call button.

I whispered to him, "What the hell kind of a hole is this you brought me to?"

"Stay on your horse, beggar," he said. Then I heard him speak for the first time with that mock pomposity, which I later came to know as self derision. "This, my friend, is the City of the Black of Heart. All hope abandon, ye who enter here. That was the slum area we just traversed. But the abode of the masses is of no concern to us. We, you see, are of the elite"—He pointed to the elevator door—"and all the bounties the world can bestow await us beyond."

The bitterness in those last words caused me to look down, but he had turned his head away.

THE elevator came down, and the door was opened by a small, wide man with a bloated face. The cretin saw Valentine and grinned hugely.

He spoke in a thin, piping voice. "Hiya, Valentine. Back early today, huh? Somethin' the matter? Who's yer friend?"

Valentine's voice was a little softer as he said slowly and distinctly, as though talking to a child, "My friend is called Bill Marlin. Now remember him, Charon. Because he belongs with me—upstairs." He pointed. "So you'll have to ferry him across the Styx every day."

The cretin nodded happily. He grinned at me and pointed a thumb toward Valentine. "He's a great guy. Charon he calls me. That's not my name. My name is Peter. But he calls me Charon. I like that. I like him."

The elevator only went up one floor. Peter opened the door and said, "If Valentine likes you, Peter will like you, Bill Marlin. I'm glad you will be one of us."

Both Valentine and I gazed at the door as it stood shut.

The cripple's words were spoken low, not meant for my ears. "One of us," he muttered. "The deformed and the depraved, abnormalities, the dregs from the cess-pools of humanity. . . . Us!"

We moved slowly down the wide, stuccoed hallway, because Valentine could roll his platform over the thick carpeting only with difficulty.

I had a pretty good idea by then where we were, but I wasn't certain until we came to the second elevator. Then I saw him—the operator—the man I had struck with the milk bottle!

The sudden fear that hit me vanished when I saw that my disguise successfully hid my identity.

Valentine and the other exchanged growled greetings, and we rode up.

I was exultant. I was coming close. When we first entered the Royale, it had occurred to me that we were but a block away from the Regis Arms. I even wondered if the two buildings might not stand back to back. Now I knew that they did. And I also knew that the cubicles of horror which we had passed extended from the Royale, underneath the apartment building in which we now were.

We got off at the ninth floor, as I knew we would.

As we left the elevator, the operator said, "Regis just sent word down. He wants you to see him right away."

Valentine snapped, "He does, does he? Well, you tell him I'll see him when I damned please." Then, as though a sudden flash of rage had struck him and had as suddenly departed, he grudgingly nodded. "Okay. You can tell him I'll be up in ten minutes."

After the door closed, I said, as though I didn't particularly care, "Who the devil is this guy Regis?"

Valentine answered distractedly, "That's it. He's the devil, all right. Satan incarnate." Then he turned to me. "Regis is the black-souled potentate of our kingdom of darkness. He is not a man to be crossed." Then he added reflectively to himself, "Yes, one thinks twice before crossing Regis."

BECAUSE the successive impact of shock upon shock had already drained my body of its capacity for amazement, I was not at all surprised when we entered the apartment. It was furnished lavishly, yes. But more than that, it was furnished in excellent taste—and I instinctively knew that Valentine had planned it himself. There were two canvases—small but well chosen. A single piece of statuary—a table lamp base that was a copy of *The Discus Thrower*. One entire wall was lined with good books.

Not even the sudden appearance of Violet

could shock me. She stood in the doorway of another room, wiping her hands on a short apron.

She looked at me timidly, said shyly, "Hello, Valentine."

He acknowledged her greeting with a grunt, turned to close the door.

Without looking at her he muttered, "Oh, Bill, that's Violet, my housekeeper." Then he twisted toward her, snapped his fingers and said, "Come on, Violet, don't stand there like a goose. Take Mr. Marlin's coat."

She rushed over to do it. Mousy little creature—pale, straight black hair. I thought, *Faded Violet!*

But when she came nearer I saw that she was not very old. Her face—strange face. Her eyes told the story—hard, bitter—and sunk . . . defeated. Old eyes. But not so her mouth. That was still young, expressive. It was twisted, yes—twisted like the mouth of a little girl about to cry. Afterwards that was how I always saw Violet—a little girl about to cry.

Valentine took off his own short coat, drew his worn woolen sweater over his head—and got off his platform!

I couldn't move as I watched. He walked off—on his hands. It wasn't ludicrous; it wasn't even tragic the way he did it. There was actual grace and dignity the way he carried himself. There was no pity in my gaze. Already I had ceased looking upon him as a cripple.

He went to an overstuffed chair in the living room. He did it easily, no sign of effort. His long arms swung stiffly, balanced on fingertips alone. His abbreviated body, with just the slightest stumps of legs, swayed lightly from side to side with each pace, as it hung between those two sturdy arms. Two steps led down to the sunken living room. He took them in a single stride and vaulted easily into the chair.

He nodded me to the couch next to him. I moved woodenly, eyes glued to him. He pointed to a silver humidior on the coffee table in front of me. I took out two cigars and handed him one. *Finest Havana!*

Valentine took a long puff and watched me through the smoke. "Well," he said, "how are you enjoying the gallop?"

I shook my head dazedly. "I don't believe it. I see it, but I don't believe it. And I don't get it."

He smiled expansively. "You and me will have a long talk. I'll tell you all about it. We're going to have a lot of long talks. But for now, this is all you gotta know. This is your home. You'll have Violet's room. She can stay elsewhere until I arrange for an apartment for you."

I raised my eyebrows. "For me?"

My face must have been twisted in bewilderment. He laughed.

"Don't be so puzzled; it's all very simple. The rents are a little high, but it's worth it, and you'll be able to afford it."

I fingered my ear dubiously. "I'll be able to afford it?"

He nodded. "I saw the way you made coin this afternoon. Some of us just have an appeal that clicks; some haven't. I have it; you have it. You can make a fortune in this town; I know." Then he added, "And don't forget my mendicant friend, that you'll be carrying a side line of choice stocks of opium, heroin and marihuana. There's a fortune in that in this town."

I said, "How do you work it? Risky?"

"Not a bit. All on the Q.T. We've got a very select clientele. We pick out a couple of customers from our lists, let them know where to find you—and you make the exchange. Simple."

"Yeah," I said slowly. "Very simple." Then I asked, "This whole establishment in the same business?"

He frowned. "The scope of our organization is quite broad. The unlawful ways of making a living in this community are devious and numerous, and the activities of our fellow members encompass many. The more successful of us belong here in Valhalla. Those others, across the Styx—they also serve."

"And just how do you fit into this set-up?" I asked. "I can tell you rate around here."

He drew himself up haughtily, and spoke again with that mock pomposity, "I, sir, am a member of the board of directors of this institution. You might even rank me as first vice-president." He struck a Napoleonic pose. "I used to be king of the beggars—before Regis came along. He was a man of vision, a man of enterprise. He was a good front. He had contacts; he had ideas. So now we all drink from the same cistern—the beggar, the thief and the freak." He smiled and waved a hand around the room. "But, you see, it has its compensations."

We were silent for several minutes then. Finally Valentine got up and mounted his platform again. "I'm going to see Regis. Bella probably phoned the news of your arrival ahead to him. 'I'll try to arrange for a room for you. Nothing to worry about.'"

"Valentine!"

I stopped him with his hand on the door. "Suppose I—suppose I shouldn't care for the accommodations. Will I have any difficulty in—er—in—"

"In leaving?" he finished for me.

I nodded.

His mouth was a straight line as he said, "Bill, when you groped down that dark alley to the theater, it was a one-way walk. When once you entered into this fraternity, you became bound to us in body and brain and soul. Bound with the chains of greed and lust and fear. And those chains will endure, Bill—until death do us part."

He closed the door softly behind him, and I sat there, with his words still sounding in my ears.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whom the Gods Destroy. . . .

I GOT to my feet finally. He had said something about going up to see Regis. That meant the penthouse. I walked over to the Venetian blinds. By squinting between two slats I could see the street. I looked for the draw string with which to open them or pull them up. There was none.

I went into the kitchen to talk to Violet. I smiled and said, "He's a great guy, isn't he?"

That had been the perfect thing to say. Her face beamed. She seemed to light up as she spoke.

"He's the greatest man I know." She spoke reverently.

"I don't like the idea of putting you out of your room," I said. "I'll try to make some other arrangements."

"Oh, no," she cried, almost in alarm. "Don't do that." She paused, then added slowly, "Valentine wants you to stay here. I can go somewhere."

I studied her carefully, trying to get a lead, as I said, "You love him a great deal, don't you?"

She didn't answer—just shook her head up and down. Her eyes were bright.

I said, "He doesn't realize how much, does he?"

She shook her head again—sidewise this time. I knew that from that moment on we were friends.

We talked then—for maybe ten minutes. I pumped her carefully. I learned a lot—more than I had hoped for. But it wasn't strange that she should talk. We were friends. And what's more—I understood her. Probably the only person she knew to whom she could talk—who cared what she had to say. Then, too, despite the sordidness about her, she herself was utterly guileless. Whether she was aware she was living in a sink-hole of crime and depravity I don't know. But certainly it mattered nothing to her. Valentine was there and she could care for him; that was her one concern, and to all else she was blind.

"Why shouldn't I love him?" she said dreamily. "He's a fine man—a great man. He speaks, and others rush to obey him. He's kind and considerate. And he knows everything." She was suddenly fierce. "I'm glad he doesn't have any legs. That makes him mine. A man like him wouldn't even notice me otherwise, but—"

"Then he isn't always as he was tonight? So brusque, I mean?"

She shook her head. "Just for a few days—and that won't last long. Just until *she* goes away."

"She?"

Violet pointed upstairs. "Some woman up there with Regis. But there have been others up there—and there will be others. She will not stay long."

It was a strain to keep my voice calm. I was glad she had her back turned to my face.

I said, "What's she like, this woman? Uh—is she—beautiful?"

Violet shrugged. "I guess she's beautiful. I don't know. I saw her once. . . . There's something about her—not beauty—something evil. She has Valentine bewitched."

"Bewitched?"

She spoke on in her monotone, her voice seemingly divorced from the impact of her words. "Bewitched—yes. So that he is like a madman sometimes. At nights he locks himself in his room, so that I won't see. But there is a keyhole. I can watch him go out the window. There must be a rope by which he pulls himself up. Sometimes when he comes down he will rush out immediately. Other times he just stays in his room, walking up and down. His face is fierce to look at, and he mutters words I can't hear." Violet shrugged again. "But this will pass away, and Valentine will be the same again."

VALENTINE came back then, and we had dinner. It started off as a silent meal, with

Valentine staring into his plate, a dark, brooding cloud over his face. He didn't speak. And I, with no mouth for food, made a pretense at eating. I was tense, straining for action—and yet I knew the time had not yet come.

At length Valentine spoke. His ill-humor seemed to have worn off. He said he had arranged for a room for me already; he'd take me there later.

We talked then—of trivia. He seemed very impatient, rushing the meal through.

After dinner, he said, "I'm sorry, Bill. We'll have to put off our talk for some other evening. I'm going to be busy tonight. Come on. I'll show you to your room."

I followed him down the hallway a short distance. He reached up, put a key in the lock and swung the door open. He didn't even come in with me; merely said good night and trundled back down the hall.

MY ROOM required but a single glance of inspection. Like a hotel room. The kind you can get anywhere for three-fifty a night.

I closed the door and leaned against it, trying to think. But I couldn't think. My brain was in a turmoil. I realized only that instant action was necessary. Lord only knew if it wasn't too late already. Too late? Too late for what? I

chased a host of crazy thoughts from my brain, and stepped out into the hall. I was on my way. I wasn't sure where, but something was bound to happen.

It did—not a minute later. I found the stairway at the end of the hall. Unguarded! Leading upward!

How I wanted to take them three at a stride! But I took it easy. Good thing! They were waiting for me at the top of the stairs—three of them. Just thugs.

I looked up at them, struggled to be casual. I grunted, "Hi," and tried to walk past.

But I couldn't because the three stood blocking the top step.

One said, "Where do you think yer goin'?"

I shrugged. "Oh, just lookin' around. I'm new here."

"Well, look somewhere else," he said. "Not here—ever."

I stared at them—the three of them. I forced my palms open—mustn't let them notice clenched fists. There was no other choice; I turned and walked back down the stairs.

Before I reached the bottom, one of them called, "You'll find the bar on the third floor, buddy."

And because I needed to think and because I needed a drink, I went over to the elevator and down to the bar.

I'VE seen bars like that—in any of the nicer hotels around town. Beautifully furnished—lots of black and white plush. Mellow lighting.

And the people! I should have expected what I found, but it shocked me. There weren't more than a dozen there. Half of them were the most loathesome creatures I've ever seen.

I moved woodenly to the bar.

A voice said, "What'll it be bud?"

Still looking awe-struck at the others in the room, I order a Scotch. And then it hit me—that voice!

I looked up—and then I was calling myself seven kinds of a damn fool. It was the cop—the tough-looking one who had batted me around. Cop, my hat! No wonder he hadn't run me in! They were clever, all right. A couple of phony uniforms to keep nosey guys like me away.

He brought my drink, and I took a long pull on it when I saw he didn't recognize me.

I looked around the room and turned back to my drink in disgust.

The bartender leaned across and spoke sympathetically. "I know how yuh feel, bud. Gruesome, ain't it?"

I just grunted.

"You'll be stayin' around here I guess, huh?"

I nodded. "For a while."

He shook his head in approval. "Good. We

could use a couple of halfway normal looking guys around this dump.

"But you know," he whispered, "it ain't so bad." I could feel it coming; now he was getting confidential. "I get a kick outa watchin' them. Take little Harvey, for instance."

I followed his glance to a nearby table. Harvey was less than three feet tall. The girl at the table with him was nearly six.

"Harvey's a pretty good kid," the bartender was saying. "All his life he's been wanting to go out with tall babes. But he can't do it. Leatways, nowhere but here."

"What's in it for her?" I asked.

"She's a cokey," he said. "Hell, didn't you know? Almost all the dames here are snow birds. That's what keeps 'em good. They can come and go like they please, but they know if they don't do like they're told, or if they yell copper, their supply of the stuff would be cut off. It's a good system."

As I left the bar, I recognized the face of a man seated in the corner. Trigger Morney, public enemy number one who had vanished two years before!

I went back to Valentine's apartment. I was wondering if he had gone out.

Violet let me in. When I asked if Valentine was there, she just pointed. Upward.

I cursed. With him already up there, I couldn't very well use his rope.

I was going along the hall when I got the idea. My door was just across from the elevator. I darted into my room to get what I wanted, then waited.

The car came up. My pal was still at the controls. I told him I wanted to go back to the bar. He grunted sullenly and let the gate slam shut. Even before he could set the car in motion I acted. I took out the heavy drinking glass from my pocket and let him have it just behind the ear. He folded.

I opened the gate, looked out and saw the hall was clear. I dragged him into my room. Bed-sheets did the job of tying and gagging him, and I was back in the car in two minutes.

JUST one floor up to the penthouse. I opened the door cautiously and peered out. The elevator opened on what seemed to be a reception room of a sort. It was empty except for the heavy carpet and the overstuffed leather chairs.

A door across the room! I held my breath and eased it open, stepped inside. It was dark, but I could tell I was in a living room—immense.

I breathed softly, listening. I heard a voice—indistinct, distant, just a few words.

I made my way slowly to the doorway. The sounds were more audible, but indistinct still. An occasional word muttered low. And another sound—a choked sob, a muted squeal of protest.

Then I was near the room, could peer into one

lighted corner. It seemed to be a library. I inched forward, and the room grew in my sight.

Then I stood there transfixed.

Lorelei was standing there—and the tall, dark man who, I knew, was Regis. He had one arm about her, his face bent down to hers. I heard her give out a little gasp of pain, and then her lips, twisted and convulsing, met his. And I saw then that the hand with which he held her to him was clasped brutally about her wrist, twisting her entire arm at a crazy angle behind her back.

"Once more, my darling," he murmured. Sibilan words I could barely hear. "Just once more—of your own will, my darling. A kiss. . . ."

For just an instant she hesitated. His hand tightened, and then she yielded.

A far-off voice cried, "Lorelei!"

My own!

They both stared at me in surprise.

Regis loosened his hold on her, a black fury twisting his face.

"Who the devil are—?"

"Jeff!"

My greatest fear left me. Lorelei was all right; she was in her right mind, at least. She knew me! And then she was in my arms, clutching me close, sobbing.

HOW long I held her that way I don't know. But at length the voice of Regis cut in.

"A very tender scene," he said. "Very, very touching. You have no idea how it distresses me to have to break it up." There was a revolver in his hand. Then his voice was like a whip, "Lorelei, come here!"

She stayed at my side.

The safety clicked. His lips twisted in a snarl, but he spoke softly. "Lorelei, shall I put a bullet in his brain?"

She sighed, and walked over to him.

He wrapped one arm about her, and said, "You have no idea, Mr. Harlow, how delighted I am at your visit. Of course Lorelei has told me much about you."

From a desk drawer he extracted a length of clanking steel—handcuffs! Deftly he clamped one of Lorelei's wrists. Then he dragged her across the room to the radiator—chained her there!

"I'm not going to kill you, Harlow," he said. "Not right now. Let me explain to you why."

I eyed him carefully, ready to attack. But he was too far away, and his gun was steady.

"You may have witnessed part of our—educational program," Regis was saying. "It is proceeding slowly, but we're getting results. To put the facts honestly, I am in love with Lorelei. Lorelei does not love me. That, however, is not an insurmountable obstacle. Others have been taught to love Regis." Then his voice seemed to change slightly. "But she's different from the

others, more spirited. That's why I want her—and that's how I want her. I could have won her before now; I could have broken her. But I want her as she is. I can bend her will to mine quite easily, but unfortunately, in a hypnotic state she is a dull dispirited character."

He smiled thinly. "You've made my task difficult all along, Harlow. I almost lost Lorelei once because of you—when she managed to run away to meet you at the pier. You see, I've been trying to build one love on top of another. That was a mistake. I should have first destroyed the other. Yet I can't kill you; as a martyr, your memory would be all the stronger to overcome."

Then he stepped back, placed the revolver on the desk and stepped away from it.

"There's only one way to dispose of you," he said. "To humble you before her eyes. I'll face you man to man, Harlow, with our bare hands. Then she will see who is the better man."

He advanced toward me, arms outstretched. That was when I first realized he was mad. In his warped brain he was sure he could smash me in a physical contest. He expected that to bring Lorelei into his arms!

But this was no game to me. I knew it was a better break than I had prayed for, and I wasn't going to pass it up. I lunged for the fireplace.

He grasped my intention and his hand caught my upraised wrist—and then I felt the strength of the man—like tempered steel. I felt my wrist snap. I twisted, hooked my left fist to his stomach. It landed, but he hardly seemed to notice. His right was a blur at my side, and then something crashed high against my head. Even as I flew backward I felt strangely limp, and then my head struck something. There was a blare of painful light, and then blackness.

THE pain in my head was sharp. It brought me to. My wrist hurt. I tried to move it.

I couldn't. Then I realized I was bound—hand and foot. I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was Lorelei. Dressed in an evening gown now. She was standing there, facing me—but she didn't see me. Her eyes were blank, empty.

Regis towered behind her, draping a heavy fur cape over her shoulders.

He looked at me, and said, "I'll finish with you later, Harlow. We—" He put his arms around Lorelei and kissed the top of her head—"have a theater engagement. I trust you will wait."

"You crazy devil," I cried. Take your filthy hands off her."

He had left her, was standing over me now, his face a mask of red.

"Shut up!" he cried. "I'll kill you if you don't. I'll kill you!"

"You're mad," I raved. Stark, raving mad! She'll never love you!"

His hands were about my throat then. He

was screaming something; I don't know what. And I was screaming. But then I couldn't scream because there was no room in my throat. There was an iron bar across my throat, and my breath couldn't get past, but welled up like flood waters behind a dam.

And then, with my senses reeling, I made out Lorelei. She was standing there, behind Regis, and she seemed to waver in my bleary sight. But there was a gun in her hand—and then a blast of flame. And the dam had burst and air flooded my lungs even before my falling body had crashed to the floor. My vision cleared, and I saw Regis turn, bewildered wrath on his face. His fist moved and met the side of Lorelei's head, and as she went stumbling backward he grabbed the gun.

Regis took a step toward her.

Then, like a figment of nightmare, I saw it happen. With a shattering of glass the French windows flew open. And in from the roof garden hurtled a figure—ridiculous, truncated, avenging figure, sailing, arms outstretched, toward Regis.

There was an impact. The pair stumbled back. Then they stood there, struggling. And Valentine's massive hands were locked about Regis' neck.

With one hand the tall man clawed at his throat. In his other the gun was clubbed, beating wildly at the weird figure that clung from his neck. But the figure would not be beaten off.

Regis staggered backward, his face a livid purple. He reversed the gun, put it against Valentine's body.

The shot was loud. Valentine jerked convulsively, but his grip still held. Regis' face was a mottled blue now. His finger moved on the trigger and three shots sounded almost as one.

Then they fell. Regis crumpling lifelessly—and Valentine crashing to the floor with him.

I started to scream, but it stuck in my throat. Valentine was moving. . . .

Horror-stricken, I watched him, followed him as he clawed his way gaspingly across the floor.

At the figure of Lorelei he paused.

Helplessly I watched as he raised his head over hers.

And then he kissed her—briefly, tenderly upon the lips.

Then he turned to me, and his voice was a hoarse, gasping whisper. "Take—take care of her, kid. There's . . . only you . . . now. I might have given you . . . a run for her, if—if things had . . . been different. But tell her I . . . loved her. . . . The nicest . . . thing that ever . . . happened to . . . me. . . ."

As in a dream I watched him after that. As he held back, with the revolver, the guards who stood aghast in the doorway . . . as he clambered weakly to the phone and called the police . . . as he toppled onto the floor, dead.

(Continued on page 63)

STAND IN

by **B. B. FOWLER**

Can you solve the grim riddle of the man who went up to lead an orchestra he had never seen before—knowing that he would die with the first note they played?



THE youngsters were coming out of the building next to the Kit Kat Club as Ed Balder got out of the taxi. The girl was dark and petite and sparkling. The boy was blond, smiling.

The girl glanced up, crinkled her nose as she sniffed the air and said, "It's spring again, Joey."

They linked arms and walked gayly down the street. Ed watched them, a tall, dark man, his hard face expressionless under the brim of his gray hat. He lifted his chin a little as though he, too, could sense what they felt in the air.

He knew what they meant. There was an indefinable softness in the atmosphere. It was not warm, but spring stirred somewhere in the watery twilight above him. It made Ed feel older than his forty-two years, and just now he didn't want to feel older. He wanted right now to feel young again.

Mike was at the bar. The interior of the club stretched away into enveloping darkness. Mike lifted his scarred chin, his heavy brows pulled down in a scowl of worry as he threw a glance toward the office and said, "Dan Whelan is waiting for you."

The name made Ed feel bleak and cold inside. He walked without expression across to the office door and went in, closing the door behind him. Then he stared levelly at the man beside the desk.

Dan Whelan stood up. Dan was tall and lean and hard-bitten. His eyes were like agates. His mouth was a bloodless gash in his face. As usual he came directly to the point.

"You've got a young punk named Avery working here for you."

Ed nodded. "Sure. He's the orchestra leader. Why?"

Dan's eyes remained as expressionless as his voice. "As you know, I got into a jam a couple of months ago. A guy was too close to me. I

caught him as he was coming out of the side door of a place in Philly. He was so close that I had to do something about it. I didn't think anyone was around. But this kid, this Avery, was there in the darkness taking a smoke. I didn't know anything about it till one of my boys tabbed him going back in."

"So?" Ed asked tonelessly.

"I've got to fix it so he don't ever talk," Dan replied.

He drew a long, slow breath. "This Avery had never seen me before. He didn't know who I was. He told the cops he saw someone. But he couldn't put a finger on me. Then I saw him here in your place the other night. Sooner or later he'll see me around and know who I am."

Ed said nothing. He just kept watching Dan with his flat, expressionless eyes.

"That can't happen," Dan said. "It's far too important. I want to go on walking around without worrying. So I'm taking care of the kid tonight."

Ed frowned. "Is that necessary?"

"You know me," Dan said shortly. "I don't want to go to the chair. Of course it's necessary. It's necessary enough for me to do it myself. And I'll do it so there's no kickback."

He glanced at the door which led out to the corridor that opened onto a side street. "I'll be here." Then he opened the door that looked out past the bar to the tiny orchestra stand. "The kid will be there. It will take just one shot. I won't miss. They'll never know who it was."

"Not in my place," Ed said slowly. But he knew he was only talking for effect.

"In your place," Dan said evenly. "Of course you'll stand for it. If you tried to kick over the traces I would just let Amarillo, Texas, know where they could pick up a guy they want for murder."

Ed shrugged. "You've got me. But I think you're not being smart. After all, you've got your alibi for that night. You fixed that up at the time. Why worry about the kid?"

"Sure, I've got an alibi," Dan admitted. "But that's only for an emergency. It might not stand up if there was an eye witness to place me at the spot in Philly. They might tear that alibi to pieces. I'll play it my way."

He moved toward the door. "I'll be running along now, Ed. But I'll be here when the place opens. I'll be here when the kid takes his bow."

AFTER he had gone, Ed stood for a long time staring at the door. There was nothing he could do. Cold hate stirred briefly in him. He shrugged that away and went out through the door to the bar.

Dina Cromwell came in from outside, and Ed's heart did a sudden lurch. Dina was twenty-two, golden blonde, with eyes like turquoise. Her skin was rich cream and her smile was honey.

Just now she didn't smile. She quickened her pace as she saw Ed. He smiled at her and turned to lean on the bar and gaze down into her eyes.

It was then he got the perfume. At first he thought it was Dina's. Then he knew it wasn't. It was too direct and full. It was like something rising out of the past to envelope him in its aura.

He forgot the perfume for a moment as Dina said, "I'm worried, Ed. It's Cliff. When he went home last night, a man followed him. I know it's crazy. But I couldn't help remembering that night in Philadelphia. You know, that night he told us about."

Ed nodded absently. Dina's words jarred him. But something else was moving him deeply. He spotted the cause in a glass behind the bar, a little bunch of pink and white blossoms.

He jerked his head toward them. "Where did you get those, Mike?" he asked the bartender.

Mike looked fussed. "Aw, a kid came in selling them just before you got here. Something about them kinda got me. They're Mayflowers; you know, them trailing arbutus things."

Ed nodded briskly. Suddenly he was thirty years younger, picking Mayflowers in the woods behind the pasture. He could smell the wet, warm smell of the firs and spruces in the strengthening sun. The scent of the Mayflowers came to him with the scent of young, green, growing things.

He glanced at Dina and then he knew. He didn't love this girl. He couldn't. There were too many things between, like the episode in Amarillo and a hundred lesser ones in the same pattern.

Dina was youth. It was youth he wanted, and youth was gone. It had vanished somewhere along the dark years he had left behind.

He reached across the bar and plucked the

Mayflowers from the glass. He buried his nose in them and breathed deeply. The perfume was like something cleansing his brain. It stripped away everything but the cold, merciless knowledge of what he was and where he stood.

Dina was saying, "If Cliff only knew who that man was. He'd never seen him before. If he only knew, he could tell the police and then that would be the end of it."

Ed nodded. "Sure, that would be the end of it." His eyes grew direct and probing. "You love the guy, don't you?"

Dina nodded and let her pale eyelids droop over her eyes. "Yes, Ed. I—we—. Well, I had an idea that you—"

"Forget it," Ed said harshly. "I don't rob cradles."

He took Dina by the elbow and led her to the door. "You're fired," he said. "You're not singing here any more."

As she gave him a startled glance he said, "So is Cliff." He took a wallet from his pocket and slipped out a sheaf of bills. "This is a grub-stake. Get married on it. Go on now and get Cliff."

As she hesitated, startled, bewildered, he shoved the bills into her hands. "Go after Cliff." He glanced at the clock. "You'll catch him before he leaves the hotel. Tell him to go straight to the cops. Tell the cops that the guy Philadelphia wants for murder is Dan Whelan. The cops will know where to pick him up. Cliff can identify him."

As she hesitated, Ed said roughly, "Go on. Get going. It's your one chance for a break. If the cops don't get Dan, he'll get Cliff—sooner or later."

LONG after she had gone he stood, leaning against the bar, smelling the Mayflowers. He was so far off and aloof that Mike watched him uneasily. This wasn't the boss that he knew.

He heard Whelan when he slipped into the office via the corridor door. He watched the boys take their places on the little orchestra stand. Smiling oddly, he parted the bunch of Mayflowers, stuck a few in his button hole.

He handed the rest back to Mike, saying, "Thanks, Mike."

His shoulders were straight as he crossed the room and stepped up to the orchestra stand. He was the same size and build as Cliff Avery. In this dim light, with his back to the office door, no one could tell the difference.

As the boys gave him surprised glances, he smiled, "It's okay, boys. I'm just standing in for a few minutes."

He felt like laughing aloud as the picked up the baton. Cliff would be down telling his story to the cops. He could picture Dan Whelan's face when he found out that he had shot his own alibi dead.

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO DIE

by **DONALD G. CORMACK**



CHAPTER ONE City of Brotherly Hate

I PUSHED the watch across the counter. "How much?" I asked the pawnbroker. "Not to hock—to sell outright."

He looked at me, then examined my shabby clothes, and finally picked up the watch. His face screwed up with disapproval. He hesitated as though unwilling to give me anything at all, then shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that said he was a great humanitarian and a sucker for anyone hard up.

"Two dollars, mister. It's old. Maybe two dollars."

The broker reached across the counter and put the watch right in front of me, as though he hoped I'd pick it up and leave the store without robbing him of his two dollars. The watch had cost more than ten times that, and he knew it. Right now, though, I was desperate for money—and he knew that too. I needed more than a lousy two bucks. My room rent for the next week would be three bucks, and a guy has to eat a little.

Reluctantly, I pulled my hand out of the other pocket and dropped the chain on the counter. But it wasn't the chain I cared about. It was the little gold football, engraved with my name and the name of the college, that was attached to the chain. That gold trophy was my last link with the past.

"Six dollars for the lot," I said. "Outright sale. And don't try to clip that price down!"

He must have seen I meant it. He hesitated a moment and I could almost hear, "Five-fifty, and that's final!" running through his mind. Then he went to the cash register and plucked out six ones with great effort. I signed a sales form; he handed me the money and I walked out into the dingy slum street again.

My right fist was knotted tight around those bills, but there was something even tighter knotting in my stomach. I was scared.

"Where the hell are you headed, guy?" I whispered to myself. "What are you going to do after this is gone?"

FAT, blowsy Mrs. Retzloff, the slatternly landlady, was sitting in the hall, right by the entrance to my room. As usual, she was humming a random, off-key tune to herself in a

voice deep enough to have been a man's—a drinking man's. When she saw me she got up and stood in front of the door, the smell of stale gin billowing over me when she moved.

She held out a fat, dirty hand. "Let's have it, Ovington. Or should I say Mr. Ovington to you?"

"Just call me Leslie, grandma," I told her maliciously.

That crack about looking old got her burning. When I held out the dough I owed she snatched it out of my hand and went flouncing unsteadily down the hall. Anyway, she made a lot of unnecessary motion. And that's probably what caused the piece of paper to slip from her apron pocket. I saw it fluttering in her wake and for no good reason I went after it and picked it up. Maybe I had some idea of returning it if it looked at all important.

In my room, I went over to the window and unfolded the paper. The writing was in Mrs. Retzloff's own shaky hand—apparently some sort of list laboriously penciled out. Puzzled, I read:

(1) *He's a stranger in town; been here two weeks.*

(2) *Labels in clothes, etc., show he comes from Wilmington.*

(3) *He's had no visitors; doesn't know anyone in city.*

(4) *Is looking for work; hasn't gone to agency; still jobless.*

(5) *He's very hard up—close to end of his rope.*

(6) *Will probably hock anything he has any day now.*

(7) *Undoubtedly knew better days; looks like a real gent.*

(8) *Probably used to know society people, or know about them.*

(9) *Looks like a good prospect. A strong okay.*

After a moment the frown left my face. I sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and began to laugh. I hadn't had a real laugh in a long time and it felt good. I let it go now—all out and loud.

Can you picture it? Can you picture this scraggly-haired peroxide blonde—monstrous in size, drunken in gait—as she prowls about her

dilapidated old tenement? Can you see her taking in every wretched human driven in misery to her door? And can you imagine her patrolling the halls of her dark rabbit-warren—listening at doors, peeking through keyholes, swilling her cheap gin?

That's what struck me so funny. With all that in her character, with this as her environment, she still went to the ridiculous extreme of investigating the "guests" that peopled her small half-world, listing their pros and cons and finally reaching some conclusion about their reliability.

At least, I supposed then she did that for everyone—not me alone. And I was listed as "a good prospect" in spite of the fact I was broke, out of work, and hocking my things—probably because I "used to know society people" and looked like a "a real gent."

If I didn't pay any attention then to the strangely persistent disquiet in the back of my mind it really didn't make much difference. The truth was due to explode over me in a very short time. The way things stood, there wasn't much I could have done about it anyway. . . .

A FEW minutes after I'd stopped laughing I heard Mrs. Retzliff in the hall outside my door. It was easy to tell who it was by the characteristic sound of her mechanical, unmelodious humming. That would keep up for a few seconds, to be interrupted as she mumbled something under her breath. Then the humming again for another short period. She was lighting matches as she scuffed around in the hall and it was obvious she was looking for the lost paper.

At last she went away, her carpet slippers pounding down the hall angrily. But now my original good humor had slipped away from me. I tore Mrs. Retzliff's strange list in to bits and flipped the pieces out the window. I pulled a business card from my pocket—the one I'd found so conveniently at my door that morning—and reread I. Kasky's generous offer to accept in pledge, or buy any honest man's gold or jewelry. That card followed the paper outside.

The old fear was coming back now, and I sat down on the bed again. Where was I headed from here? I took the three crumpled bills from my pocket, tossed them on the little wooden table and sat there staring at them. But I wasn't really seeing the money. I was looking way beyond them, deep into a dim world of the past. For another one of those countless times that past came before me.

I was back to the day when news of the transcontinental airliner's crack-up came through—with all aboard lost. All passengers lost—the whole world lost! My fiancée, Helen, had been coming east on that plane for our wedding.

The first numb shock, the growing pain, the dull apathy when everything ceases to matter—those were the steps of my reaction. There was

New Orleans, Agua Caliente, Tijuana—hazy, drink-sodden memories—and a succession of other vague cities whose names I'd forgotten, or never had known at all.

Finally, when the pain had deadened until I could live with it again—live decently and soberly—it was too late. I'd been a commercial pilot with Seaboard Air Transport, but after Helen's death I'd simply walked out on them without a word. You don't do that to any first-rate line and get away with it.

When I came out of it, sober and sane again, I found myself broke, in a strange city, most of my baggage lost or stolen, and the clothes I possessed little more than threadbare rags. At first I'd thought I could get a grease-monkey's job with the ground crew of some commercial outfit. So I'd gone to the only one in town—Nationwide Airways—and filled out their standard application blanks. A few days afterward I received a form postcard acknowledging my application, which they promised to keep on file for future reference. My only hope after that was to take *any* job that paid a daily or weekly wage—if I could get it.

That night I realized just where I stood. I'd raised my last cent on my saleable possessions; there weren't any openings in the field of commercial aviation; even the hope of other work had just about run out. But you can't make a come-back unless you can get a toe-hold somewhere along the line, no matter how low. And maybe one night you suddenly see that even the hard way isn't going to be offered you. So you sit in your room in a water-front flophouse and stare at your last three bucks, dreaming back to yesterday and the days before it.

I fell asleep right there, fully dressed, with my head on the table, and it was morning when I awoke, stiff and sore.

After washing down the hall, I put on the shirt I'd laundered yesterday and tried to kid myself into a better humor. Today could be that lucky one when a job would come my way, I kept on telling myself.

Mrs. Retzliff's crazy "character list" had long since been forgotten.

IT WAS dusk when I finally returned to my room. Even the fact that I'd had no luck all day couldn't spoil my fun in eating. It was my usual "dinner." For a dime I bought a can of baked beans at the grocery—and a whole can of beans will stick to a guy's ribs a long time, eaten hot or cold. Cold beans even taste good—when you're hungry enough.

I was about half finished when the sudden knocking came at the door. No one could be calling on me. Until it was repeated, I thought I'd only imagined it; then, answering the summons, I figured someone had made a mistake in the room.

I don't know which one of us was more

surprised, I, or the tastefully and expensively dressed girl who stood on the threshold. Coming on her unexpectedly like that—a pretty youngster, so obviously out of her environment—made me drag in my breath quickly. As for the girl, she started with alarm and retreated a step or two. For a second I thought she was going to turn and run, but she recovered herself with an almost visible effort.

"Are you—Mr. Ovington?" she asked, her voice on the verge of trembling. My confirming nod seemed to reassure her some. "I—I was sent to tell you something. It's good news. For you it is."

I felt like telling her, "You can say that again, sister; I can use a message like that." But instead I pulled the door wide open, inviting her in. She hesitated, then entered slowly, as though she half expected someone to leap out at her from behind the door or from one of the dark corners.

I really couldn't blame her. If you've ever seen a three-bucks-a-week room you know why: a carpetless floor; an unshaded bulb dangling from a cracked, stained ceiling; an iron cot; a wooden wardrobe; a lopsided wooden table, and a straight-backed chair. She had probably never deamed of such filth and poverty before.

The girl was standing in the center of the room now, her posture unnaturally stiff. I could understand the jumble of emotions, she had to contend with: her fright of this section, this house, the room, and me; her desire to get away as quickly as possible; and her decent attempt not to show any of those emotions to me. No wonder she didn't know how to begin.

"You said you had a message? Good news?" I tried to make it easier for her. "The best news I could get would concern a job."

She smiled a little uncertainly. "That's exactly it." And now that the ice was broken, she went ahead almost breathlessly. "I'm Julia Cook, Mr. Foreshall's private secretary. Tomorrow's Saturday and he was afraid he couldn't get in touch with you. He never goes to the office Saturdays, and he wants to see you right away. So he sent me to ask you to call at his home tomorrow morning for an interview. And—well—it's about a job."

"Could you give me any idea about the kind of work?" I asked.

Julia Cook seemed annoyed that she'd omitted that important detail in her confusion; her head gestured impatiently and the overhead light made restless silver pools in the waves of her jet-black hair. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ovington. He wants you to fly his private plane for him on his frequent business trips."

I was back in again! Those were the sweetest words I'd heard in many a month. I hoped she'd say them again. Half my mind was questioning the sanity of my senses while the other half was looking for a catch in what the

girl had said. But inside me there was an unthinking, singing elation. Miracles did happen!

"Only recently he decided to buy his own ship," Julia was saying. "He uses one so constantly and on such short notice. It may be he has to leave town before Monday; that would explain the rush."

"But why me?" I asked suddenly, puzzled. "How on earth did he learn my name and address—or even know I could fly?"

Julia Cook could answer that. "Mr. Foreshall has friends all over the city. When he needed a good pilot he called one of the executives in Nationwide Airways. They recommended you." She had been fumbling in her handbag, and now her slim, gloved fingers pulled out an envelope, which she handed to me. "If you hand the butler this note when you call, it will get you in to Mr. Foreshall. The address is on it. And you're to call at nine tomorrow morning."

Then, almost as unexpectedly as she had come, she was gone. I stood there in the center of the room holding the sealed letter in my hand. The address was printed on the outside: *Charles Foreshall, Esq., Twin Oaks, New Tuxedo Park, City.*

In spite of the letter in my hand, the tantalizing scent of the girl's perfume lingering in the room, it was hard for me to convince myself I wasn't dreaming. Perhaps that's why I decided to get one last glimpse of her. I left my room in the rear, walked down the dark hall and looked out the grime-frosted window that faced the street.

She had just left the building, pausing on the sidewalk to light a cigarette. I remember how odd it struck me that Julia would smoke a cigarette on the street in this section. It just didn't seem to fit in with her character. But I could have sworn I'd recognized her features by the light of the match—just as I could have sworn I'd seen her light the match with a flick of her thumbnail!

But then, maybe I was mistaken. The grime on the window pane, the night outside. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Knot Your Own Noose, Sucker!

WAS there before nine o'clock next morning. A trolley ride and a bus trip took me to New Tuxedo Park. That exclusive settlement was on the Heights. The Foreshall home, Twin Oaks, was really something to see.

No one challenged me at the little stone gatehouse and I half expected a watchman to question me as I climbed the winding driveway that led to the distant house. But nothing stirred. When I rang the chimes at the massive front doors a gaunt butler in a major general's uniform answered the summons. He didn't

seem too surprised at the sight of me and he accepted the letter without question.

"That letter confirms a business appointment I have with Mr. Foreshall," I explained. "It will recall a date his secretary made for him—concerning the new airplane he's bought, I believe."

The butler was obviously surprised. "This is the first I've heard of Mr. Foreshall having a secretary," he said, "or of his purchase of an airplane. Since he's never been up in one, I was under the distinct impression he distrusted such machines. He has said as much. In any event, he's not home now—but I'll give him your note when he returns."

There was a puzzled, suspicious look on the butler's face, and a warning bell was ringing in my brain.

"Are you sure he isn't home? I know this is an emergency."

Now the servant was showing his annoyance. "Mr. Foreshall leaves for his game of golf each day at eight, returning for lunch at about one. In the years I've been with the family I have known him to break that custom only once or twice. I saw him leave for the club myself today. You had better telephone him this afternoon."

The door closed in my face then, but that was all right with me. I knew something was screwy now; I was disappointed and sore as hell—but I wasn't scared yet. I wondered if there was any way to track down the girl who called herself Julia Cook and force her to explain her ridiculous farce of the night before—because by now I was fairly sure everything she'd told me had been a lie.

Suspicion, bewilderment and anger made me stride swiftly down the driveway—and that's why I came so unexpectedly on the surprised gardener who was concealed from the house by a large clump of bushes. He was standing beside his wheelbarrow and tools, tilting a half-empty pint-bottle to his lips. He jumped guiltily and turned to face me, a pudgy little man with wispy white hair and a smiling, jolly red face—a sort of Santa Clause in ragged dress.

I couldn't help answering that appealing smile with a grin of my own. When I came to a halt he offered me a drink but I turned it down. I figured he might know some of the answers, though.

"Trying at the house for a job, pal?" he suggested. "Old Mike, here, could have told you there's nothing open."

I shook my head. "I was looking for a friend I haven't seen in a long time. I think she was Foreshall's private secretary."

Mike looked amazed, then began to chuckle. "A secretary? Him have a secretary? What for, when he doesn't work or have any business? Maybe he'd like the idea, though, him being a lady's man. But his wife wouldn't stand for it.

Not her! She's older than the boss, a semi-invalid, and she keeps her eyes open for any monkey business. She don't trust the boss any further than Mussolini can chase the British fleet."

"I guess I heard wrong," I said. "Someone told me Julia Cook—"

The mention of the name made Mike's eyes open wide in quick recognition. "Miss Cook!" he cut in. "She was here at the house for a month or so when old lady Foreshall was sick last time. She's a registered nurse, a swell girl. I talked to her a lot. But she left only a few days back. It's too bad you—"

The sound of the car coming down from the house made a swishing noise in the gravel as it cut into the turn behind me. I stepped from the driveway, but as soon as the chauffeur spotted us he jammed on the brakes and skidded the limousine to a halt.

"The head gardener wants you up at the greenhouse, Mike," he said. Then he looked at me. "Want a lift, guy?" he invited. "I'm going down past the trolley-line to the city. Hop in."

He didn't look or sound as though he wanted to do me any favors, or to do anyone else a favor. His darkly pigmented face had a surly cast that was characteristic and permanent. I supposed the butler had sent him to make certain I got off the grounds. The offer of a lift was all right with me. I had nothing to lose.

The chauffeur clammed up after that. I tried several times to open a conversation, but he wasn't having any. He drove fast to the trolley station, dropped me there and turned around to drive back. I watched him out of sight, then suddenly decided to walk back to town, long though it was. I needed time to think.

Now the obvious questions began hammering in my mind. If Julia Cook was a fake—and she obviously was—what had been the purpose behind her elaborate story? How could she possibly have gotten my name, address and occupation? What message had been in the note I'd delivered? Why go to such elaborate pains to have it delivered at all? Why not mail it? If it had to be taken by hand, why had I been selected? *Why me?*

At first the only answer I could think of was that the purpose in my delivery, whatever it was, hadn't worked out as planned. It could be that Foreshall's absence had upset everything. But I remembered the painstaking beginning of the plan and realized that a daily custom of Foreshall's would be known.

Most of those answers were to burst upon me within the next hour or two. But one of them came to me right then: I recalled the form postcard I'd gotten from Nationwide Airways saying that they had no pilots' or mechanics' positions open. Fat, slatternly Mrs. Retzloff could have read that—and she could have noticed the silver wings I wore on my lapel. Figuring that much,

I recalled the crazy "character list" the snoopy old woman had written out. Memory of it brought sudden sweat to the palms of my fisted hands.

And then I began to get scared—really scared.

DECIDED not to return to my room at Mrs. Retzlaff's until I knew what sort of trap I was being drawn into. And rather than wait quietly for unknown disaster to come, like a clay pigeon in a shooting gallery, I decided to start some action of my own. Julia Cook had been the direct source of all the action so far—and she was also my best lead. I decided to track her down. Once I caught up with her I'd get the explanation one way or another—but I'd certainly get it.

It was ten-thirty when I got back to the business section of the city. I stopped in the first drugstore I came to and went back to the telephone booths. In the classified directory I looked up the heading, *Nurses Registries*; there were ten of them listed, but two in particular—the American and the National—indicated they were the biggest by the size of the ads they ran. I copied down the telephone numbers of all of them anyway, and then turned to the regular directory. At random, I selected the name Dr. Roland Hewitt, of 24 Beekman Road.

My second call was successful. Giving the name and address of Dr. Hewitt, I said I wanted the address of Miss Julia Cook for an emergency case. She was familiar with the patient's history, I explained, and only she would do. I copied down the information.

I felt pretty good as I cut across town; whatever net it was that had been drawing itself about me, now at least I was aware of it and could fight back. I was beginning to get somewhere. And then came the bombshell that exploded my optimism and left me floundering helplessly again, my stomach a hollow ache.

The shrill voices of the news hawkers howled it at every corner; the radio was blaring it in every home; the headlines screamed it to the world: *Foreshall Child Kidnaped!*

No one had to tell me what sort of letter I had delivered that morning! I bought one of the papers and went into a public park to read the account. It ran:

Saturday, December 12, (CNS)—Sometime between eight and nine-thirty this morning, five-year-old Walter Foreshall, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Foreshall of fashionable New Tuxedo Park, disappeared from the home of his aunt, Miss Mary Eltinge Foreshall of nearby West Burbury, with whom the child had been visiting for the past few days. Details are still lacking.

It has been learned, however, that the child, in the company of a nursemaid, had been playing on the grounds of the estate. An hysterical maid, who had been seized from behind and choked into unconsciousness, ran screaming to

the house to report the crime at nine-thirty. She said she had fought furiously but had been unable to prevent the abduction or get a view of her attackers. She reported, however, that she believed them to be a man and woman. She tentatively set the time of the attack at shortly before eight-thirty.

Police immediately phoned news of the child's seizure to his mother—this at about ten o'clock. Mrs. Foreshall remembered a letter left at the house earlier for Mr. Foreshall. It contained the ransom demands—reportedly \$100,000. The child's father was then summoned from the country club, where he had been playing golf with friends.

Mrs. Foreshall is on the verge of collapse. Both she and her husband begged the police and the public to leave them strictly alone until the child is safely returned. Every effort is being made to meet the kidnapers' demands immediately. Reportedly a description of the ransom-note deliverer was given police by Walter Hughes, family butler, and Howard Clapp, chauffeur.

Police refused to comment on other findings, if any. They have agreed to remain quietly in the background, as requested by the parents, until the ransom is paid and the child returned. There is some hope early afternoon may see this, if the demanded sum can be raised quickly enough.

It is natural to speculate that one of the actual kidnapers may have delivered the ransom demand, perhaps thinking the nursemaid dead and the crime yet unreported. The authorities are convinced there was some "inside" contact, so smoothly was the abduction carried out and so well-informed did the criminals seem on the child's whereabouts and customary daily regimen.

• I didn't bother about unanswerable questions or quiet logic now. I had to act! A growing anger was swelling inside me to crush my former apprehension and fear. A single name burned in my brain—*Julia Cook!* And now there was no time to lose.

I didn't know how truthful the news account had been when it reported the police would keep "hands off" until little Walter Foreshall was returned, but I did know they had my description. I wasn't taking any chances on being picked up. Furthermore, if I was going to save myself from the closing trap, I had to act fast. I strode out of the park, hopped into a curbed taxi and gave Julia Cook's address.

I tried not to consider my chances; I tried not to think of the odds against me. What if I was alone, in a strange city and without funds? What if I had only my two hands and a couple of crumpled dollars to fight with? What if a criminal gang and the city police force were both after my hide? A fighting man with guts could lick a city! He could win!

Sure. And he could lose too—which would be the last time he'd ever lose out on anything again. . . .

JULIA COOK lived in a building with a door-buzzer system of getting inside and a self-service elevator. I looked up her apartment number—3A—then punched the bell of a family on the fifth floor. When the door clicked open, I went through and took the elevator up to the third floor. There was a peep-hole on her door, through which she could examine her callers, so after I'd pressed the bell I stood away from the door, my back against the wall and out of sight.

The peep-hole rattled open, remained that way for a surprised moment, then snapped shut again. Right afterward, as I'd figured, the girl opened the door to look out inquisitively. At the same time I was jumping forward. I hit the door with my hip and shoulder—and went right on through. The force of my charge sent the girl staggering backward, off balance, but she managed to catch herself against the side of the little kitchenette. After her first gasp of amazement she didn't make a sound; she didn't scream at sight of me. But she was no sooner on balance than she had a heavy iron frying pan in her hand, determined anger blazing in her eyes.

"Get out!" she said. "Get out at once or you'll be carried out!"

Then it was my turn to gasp. This girl wasn't the Julia Cook who'd come to my room! This girl, the real Julia Cook, was lovely, adorable. Her light brown hair, softly waved; the clear, clean sparkle of her angry eyes; the fascinating pale perfection of her features; the slim shapeliness of her small figure—I saw all that at a glance. But then she took a purposeful step toward me and I held my two arms outward, palms toward her.

"Please!" I urged desperately. "Please listen! I've made a terrible mistake, but I've got to explain to you. Something far worse will happen if you don't listen—because what I've got to say concerns the Foreshall kidnaping!"

I don't know what did it—my tone of obvious sincerity, the desperate look on my face, the mention of little Foreshall—but a second's consideration made her step back and lower her weapon.

"The Foreshall kidnaping!" she broke out, as though the meaning of my words had just become clear. "You mean little Walter—"

She hadn't heard about it yet, so I told her the whole story. I talked fast and I talked to the point, not wasting a word. When I finished she motioned me silently to follow her, went on into the apartment and sat down. She seemed numbed with shock.

"That can only mean—" She said it slowly, as though trying to comprehend her own words—"we're both being deliberately and falsely incriminated! Framed! But why?"

"I'd give my right arm to know that, Julia.

You were brought in for a simple and apparent reason—to provide an 'inside' contact. But why me? When the criminals had the details down so perfectly, stood so little chance of detection, were obviously so sure of themselves, had such little risk to take—why throw themselves wide open by this elaborate and risky frame? Why deliberately point suspicion at a man who lived right at the focal point of the crime—Mrs. Retzloff's?"

The sight of her coat, the hanger still in it as it lay across a chair, seemed to remind Julia of something. She gave an exclamation of guilty regret. She jumped to her feet.

"I was about to put on my coat and leave when you—" she smiled faintly—"called. The Registry sent me a telegram this morning—an emergency case out in the suburbs. I wasn't here when it first came; it had to be delivered twice. But late as I am, I can't possibly go now. I'll telephone in."

I would have given odds of ten-to-one about what she'd hear on the phone, but I didn't say anything. When she hung up the receiver a moment later her white face told me I'd been right.

"The Registry didn't send that message," Julia told me in a frightened voice. "It must have been part of this plan—a trap. Maybe—maybe I wouldn't have come back from that case."

"Which means you're getting out of this apartment right now," I said. "You've got to hide out in some safe place until this thing is cleared up. I'm the only one who can connect you with the crime—and the criminals certainly expect me to say that 'Julia Cook' was the one who asked me to deliver the ransom note. With the ridiculous story I'd tell about why I delivered it, the cops would figure I was trying to lie my way out from under. But I won't mention you."

Julia looked and sounded scared. "You mean you're going to—"

"Give myself up," I finished for her when she couldn't go on. "It's the only way. The thugs behind the frame expect me to hide out or try to jump town—and get picked up in the process. That'd only be another strike against the two of us. This way we stand a chance of getting at the truth—an even break."

Just how much of an even break I was going to get I found out within the hour. But first I put Julia in a cab. She was going to stay with her sister and brother-in-law. I had already memorized their address and telephone number.

Then I set out for the nearest police precinct—to give myself up and face a charge of kidnaping. My knees felt a little weak as I remembered that a conviction would bring an automatic death sentence in this state. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Third Degree Nightmare

HAVE you ever had a nightmare in which you *knew* you were only dreaming—but couldn't make yourself wake up? That's what it was like. I kept repeating to myself, "This isn't real; this isn't happening to me." But it was.

It began as soon as I surrendered at the local precinct. The quick flurry of activity that followed my announcement; the swift ride to police headquarters, sirens wide open; the official booking on a charge of kidnapping; the fingerprinting; and then the questioning. They took me down to a windowless room in the basement for the first grilling session—but they didn't get rough then. That would come later; that would come as soon as my nerves began to fray. This was just a preliminary wearing down. Routine.

At first I didn't mind the questions at all. I was so eager to convince them, I really welcomed a chance to tell my story. It was the truth, *the truth!* But their expressions didn't change. They still gazed at me with that look of sick, revolted fascination men wear when they are examining some sort of unnatural monster. Angry passions grow when men look like that.

Constantly into the smoky room came men in uniform and men in plainclothes. They stood quietly on the edge of the circling questioners, observed me silently for a few minutes and then went away. I could almost hear the word being passed around upstairs: "They've got one of the Foreshall kidnapers downstairs in the sweat-box."

After a while they brought in Hughes, the butler and Clapp, the chauffeur. They weren't taking any chances on some nut falsely confessing the crime. Both of the witnesses identified me without hesitation.

From the trend of their questions I knew that the ransom had been paid and the child safely returned. But after a while my nerves began to go; it's much harder on a guy when he's really innocent but can feel himself being sucked into the quicksand of conviction anyway. Panic comes then. Panic, then crazy, wild pleas for belief, and finally a sobbing fury that comes of hopeless frustration. I had to fight down the desire to tear into the pack of them with my fists, clubbing and slugging the truth into their brains.

They smiled with satisfaction when they saw my nerves beginning to snap—and they started to pour it on. They abandoned the old line of questioning, which had simply been to make me repeat endlessly my story of receiving the letter and delivering it. And they began to get tough. One of them produced a rubber hose with which he slammed me over the skull whenever I couldn't answer a question. After all, what

decent man would have any pity for a kidnaper, the most depraved sort of criminal?

After a while my whole head was like a tender, near-bursting boil, throbbing with red pain at the slightest touch. And the questions were ones I couldn't answer: What was the name of the girl? Who was my inside contact? Who had the ransom money? How many were there in the gang? Where was the hide-out? Where had we held the kid? Who planned the actual crime?

One of the detectives—a kindly, friendly-looking guy with graying hair—sat directly in front of me. He kept constantly remonstrating with the others to stop shouting at me, to take it easy, to lay off the rough stuff. At times he pretended to get angry at the "outrage" and warned that they'd kill me if they kept it up. "Remember the Dickson case!" he shouted time and again. "Won't you guys ever learn? You want him to get a permanently soft skull too, go insane on you?" Then he'd repeat his tireless offer to send them all from the room if I'd only tell him the truth—just quietly, the two of us. If I'd been guilty I think I would have cracked about that time. But how could I supply answers I didn't know? How could I do anything but sit there and take it?

After a long, endless eternity, when everything began to fade out and I was on the edge of unconsciousness, they suddenly let up. Someone mopped my face with a wet cloth; another gave me a drink of ice-water; a third put a lit cigarette between my lips. Then one of them was holding something in front of me, asking me if I'd ever seen it before. I fought against the hazy blur around me—and came bolt upright in my chair when my eyes finally focussed again. The detective was holding my watch and chain, with the engraved gold football dangling crazily before me!

"The nursemaid ripped that out of the pocket of the man who was choking her," a voice in the background said. "Now let's hear you explain your way out of that one, Ovington!"

In a dull, spiritless voice I explained I'd sold it two days ago to I. Kasky, a pawnbroker. For the thousand-and-first time I begged them to go to Retzloff's rooming house and search the place. I described Mrs. Retzloff again; I accused her of being one of the gang; I accused Kasky, the broker; I pleaded with them to believe me. Stony silence was my answer.

At that moment a man wearing a laboratory smock came into the room. The assembled detectives looked at him inquiringly. He said, "We just finished checking that ransom note and the prisoner's prints. They're his, all right, boys—they match, and they're all over the envelope, along with the butler's and Mrs. Foreshall's."

But a funny thing—there's nothing on the letter itself except Mrs. Foreshall's. This guy didn't handle that letter—or was more careful when he did."

Donlan, the detective sergeant in charge, was looking at me thoughtfully. "Okay, Ovington," he said at last. "You get a break. We'll check that hockshop where you sold that watch. Someone else could have bought it. We might even take a look at the rooming house too. Now let's hear a description of this Kasky guy." He had me by the arm, steering my wobbly legs toward the door. "Mack, you come with us," he said over his shoulder.

I WAS getting so used to disaster, so accustomed to the impossibly wrong becoming the accepted truth. I'm surprised it hit me so hard. But it did. I almost collapsed after Donlan and the detective called Mack had marched me into the hockshop to face Kasky, the broker. He was there behind the counter, looking inquiringly at the three of us—a tall, full-bearded man. The Kasky I'd sold my watch to had been small, bent, clean-shaven, and I'd described him that way to Donlan. In a stupor I heard Kasky agree readily to his identity, saw him look blankly at me and shake his head when asked if he'd ever seen me before.

"A watch he's supposed to have sold?" the broker repeated. "Not here! I'm a reputable dealer. There are my books. There's my stock. You can check it for yourselves! I don't buy any hot goods! I haven't bought a watch in weeks. Not in weeks!"

Then we were out on the pavement again and Donlan was saying, "The hell with it! What kind of a crazy stall does this punk think he's trying to pull on us? Let's take him back to the basement for another session. He'll talk now! He'll talk his head off!"

"Wait! Please!" I was almost sobbing with the intensity of my plea. "It's my life I'm fighting for! My life! The Retzloff house is down the street just a few doors. Take me there. One last chance! I'll describe it for you; I'll describe her; I'll describe the room I lived in. I beg of you—"

But I might have known better. If I hadn't been so groggy with exhaustion, so nearly crazed with the fear of disaster, I would have realized the hopeless odds against me. I would have known.

Mrs. Retzloff wasn't the same; she wasn't the obese, blowsy woman I'd described. She was scrawny, witchlike and bitter-faced; when she spoke, her sentences were stiff and staccato—brittle, like her dried-out, emaciated figure.

"Me and my sister own the place, mister. She's outa town just now. Been out near a month already. She's visiting friends in another city. But what's the beef? What's all the heat about? That fire-law stuff again?"

Then we went up to the room I'd occupied. A sleepy-eyed, gray-haired old man jumped nervously to his feet when the detectives pushed into the room unceremoniously. His eyes blink-

ing rapidly all the time, he explained in a high, quaking voice that he'd lived in the same room for the past eight months, as the landlady said. He hadn't done anything wrong—honest to God, he hadn't!

Everything in the room was different: new curtains on the windows; a worn ragged rug on the floor; a strange bed; an unfamiliar armchair—nothing was the same. Then I must have passed out completely.

The cold of early evening, damp against my face, brought me out of it. I knew the three of us were back in the police coupe again and headed back to headquarters. From a long way off Donlan's voice came to me.

"Look up the name and address of everyone who's been in the employ of Foreshall since the kid was born. Look especially for any young girl—a governess, a personal maid, nursemaid, housemaid or cook. You know. This punk may fold up completely before we can force it out of him."

His mention of "a young girl" did something for me. It brought back the memory of Julia; it gave me the desire and courage to fight a little while longer. The police would get to her name sooner or later, and they'd trip her up somehow. I knew she didn't have an alibi for the time of the crime or the ransom pay-off. I was her only hope; I had to fight for more than my own life alone.

Still pretending unconsciousness, I was able to see the street ahead through slit-lidded eyes. I saw the swerving truck even before Donlan, the driver. Mack let out a warning cry just as the other detective's foot jumped toward the brake—and in the same instant my leg lashed sideways, kicking his foot aside, and my hands twisted the wheel with a frenzied strength. The sickening lurch of the light car; the maddened scream of the slewing tires; the crash that comes from twisting, ripping metal; the awful feeling of the world suddenly spinning in circles—those were the fast-succeeding series of sensations that followed. Then came blackness.

But I couldn't have been unconscious more than thirty seconds or so. The protecting bodies of Donlan and Mack absorbed most of the punishment from each side—until the three of us were hurled free of the disintegrating, roofless coupe. When I came out of it I heard shouts, screams, the pound of running feet as the nearby spectators converged on the wreck.

I was on my feet and leaning weakly against a building when the first rescuers came up, so they passed me and went on toward the two motionless detectives. Then, as other people streamed past, it was easy for me to wobble on down toward the corner. Just before I passed from sight I looked back and saw both Donlan and Mack on their feet, shaking their heads groggily.

I got in the first cab I came to and rode a safe

ten blocks away from the scene. Then I went into a drug store and put through a call to Julia at her sister's home.

Calamity, for me, was only beginning. Julia Cook had never reached her sister's apartment! The other girl's bewildered, puzzled questions told me that. I hung up, numb with fear, and moved on leaden feet out to the street. I fought down my dizzy, light-headed sickness, and tried to think. Could Julia possibly have changed her mind. Could she have decided to return to her own apartment after she'd left me? I didn't know—but it was the only place I could think of to look.

SHE wasn't there. I'd known all along she wouldn't be, I suppose, but I had to make sure. And I didn't have to ring the bell to find out. The front door stood slightly ajar, almost inviting a passerby to come in and investigate—which was exactly what it was meant to do. One look inside by one of the tenants or the superintendent and the police would have been called.

The man's body was sprawled in the center of the room, face down in a small puddle of blood. He was wearing his uniform, but even without it I could see enough of his features to have known who it was. It was Howard Clapp, Foreshall's swarthy-faced, dour chauffeur. He had been dead perhaps an hour.

Clapp's body wasn't the only thing displayed for the police. Julia's belongings were strewn all over the room. Drawers and closets had been hastily emptied, as though she had packed her things for a hasty getaway.

I locked the front door, switched off the lights and sat there in the dark, trying to think. Oh, I had a pretty theory now. I figured I had the answer. Clapp, as family chauffeur, would have known the movements of young Foreshall; he would have known how easy, comparatively speaking, it would be to abduct the child while he was visiting at the home of a maiden aunt. Then, knowing the Retzlöff gang, he could have arranged with them to do the actual kidnaping—after they had built a frame around one of their down-and-out roomers who filled certain qualifications.

All the rest of the stage-setting—the two Kaskys who operated the hockshop as part of Mrs. Retzlöff's small crime settlement; the card from Kasky, left under my door in the hope I'd take its suggestion; the second Mrs. Retzlöff, probably a real sister of the first; the quickly refurbished room—all that was simple enough to explain.

All that reasoning seemed to add up. Clapp, I figured, had been killed when he asked for his share of the cut. His offering me a lift that day had been motivated simply by his desire to prevent my talking with any member of the household. All the little odds and ends of fact would tie in with that explanation. But what good

could that possibly do me? To whom could I tell it? Surely not the police.

Then it came to me! It wasn't a sure answer, but it was at least a hope. I'd go to Charles Foreshall and tell him what I knew; I'd tell him the whole truth, actually place my life in the trust of his judgment. He had known Julia personally and consequently must have seen her character; that point was in my favor. I could tell him about the murdered Clapp, killed while I was in police custody; that would help. And if I convinced him, he had sufficient money and social prominence to insist on a thorough and immediate investigation of the Retzlöff crime warren.

CHAPTER FOUR

Crime Springs Eternal . . .

IT WAS after ten when I finally arrived at the Foreshall home. On the second floor, I saw the large French windows of one room were brightly lighted. I hoped fervently I'd find Foreshall there. From what I'd heard that afternoon, the child, suffering from shock, had been ordered to a hospital by the family doctor. It was probable, then, that Mrs. Foreshall would be there with him.

Gaining the second-story porch in front of the lighted room was easier than I'd hoped. A man who could only be Charles Foreshall was sitting inside, alone. But finding just the man I wanted, alone in his library, didn't give me the kick I'd expected. Doubts were growing in me now.

Suppose Foreshall yelled for his servants? Suppose he pulled a gun from his desk, held me there until the cops answered his call? Suppose he simply shot me down in cold blood? He could do that—and fear only the thanks of the authorities for his pains.

That most persistent and nagging wonder, which had been with me from the very beginning, was gnawing in my mind still. And the theory I'd built up with Howard Clapp as the central criminal—that theory didn't answer the question: *Why should any kidnaper, sure of his alibi and the fool-proof perfection of his plan, go to the elaborate and dangerous precaution of framing an innocent outsider—when that frame alone, in spite of other absolute success, could fail, and stamp him as the guilty man?*

Then, abruptly and without further thought, I let impulse take the action.

Foreshall spun around with surprise at the sound of my entrance, but he looked more angry than frightened. A deep frown creased his athletic, weather-tanned face. He spoke easily, naturally.

"From the description, I presume you're Ovington." He gestured toward the radio, which was still playing. "I heard you'd escaped. At a

guess, I'd have said you'd run for the tall timber. Surely I wouldn't have expected you to return here. Or don't you feel you've done enough harm to this family yet?"

I hadn't expected such a reaction from him. Cold fury, or fear—either of those.

"There's a gun in this table in front of me," he said. "I could have it in my hand before you got halfway across the room. Or if you jumped back through the window, I could call the gatehouse and garage before you'd reached the ground. You're caught, Ovington!"

I don't know exactly what I said after that, but I began to talk—talk as I'd never done before. I told him about myself from the time I'd left my pilot's job; I described Mrs. Retzloff and her household; I explained the circumstances of my frame-up, and about Julia's disappearance. I told him everything.

At last he said, almost to himself, "That could be the way it was. That all seems to fit. In fact, I think I'll take a chance on you, Ovington."

He fell into deep concentration then, his head tilted on one side almost as though he were listening for something. Then he said abruptly, "Wait here a minute. I'll be right back."

After he'd gone, the music on the radio came to an end and a news announcer's voice came on. He was offering a résumé of the Foreshall kidnapping and I listened with half my attention—until the announcer's words shocked every cell in my brain into absorbed and burning concentration.

"For a time after Mrs. Foreshall's physical collapse this morning," the measured statement ran, "it was feared she would not recover sufficiently to assign a power of attorney to her financial representatives. That having been the case, the necessary \$100,000 could not have been raised to meet the ransom demand. However, the wealthy Mrs. Charles Foreshall—" I leaped to the set and cut it off, jumping from there to the phone on the desk.

"Police headquarters!" I snapped to the operator. "This is a matter of life and death!" Those words got my connection through—and fast. As soon as I had the call sergeant on the wire, I told him who I was and where I was—and to come and get me!

I knew now who the kidnaper was and this time it was more than a theory. I was sure, as positive as I'd ever been of anything! At last I had the answer to my tantalizing question—why the risk of a frame when the crime could have been handled perfectly, without a clue, without any slip pointing to the criminal!

Foreshall came back at that moment and I swung around to face him. A thug I'd never seen before was close behind him, and both of them carried guns.

"Foreshall—you kidnaped your own child!" I yelled at him. "Now I've got it—at last! Now I know the reason for the frame!"

"SINCE you're the only one besides the girl who knows there was a frame," he said easily, "you're the only one who'll look behind the accepted and official version. But you interest me, Ovington. Perhaps you've spotted some weakness. How did you catch on?"

"It was when the announcer spoke of your wife being the only one capable of paying that ransom! That means you have no money yourself, or very little. And it means when you planned the crime—reaching Mrs. Retzloff through Clapp, your chauffeur—you had to take a chance on framing someone! You knew that if the crime was too perfect, if all possible suspects were absolutely alibied, the police might start examining your own possible motives. Why did you do it?"

Foreshall shrugged philosophically. "It's tiresome being a poor man in a rich household."

"Let's get this over with, boss," the thug said nervously. "With him and the girl both on the place, I get the willies."

Carefully avoiding any chance of being spotted by the other servants, Foreshall directed me out of the house and across the grounds toward the rear. After a time we came to a trail leading sharply downward to a private boathouse on the bay.

We were in the boathouse now, and the first person I saw was the repulsive, huge-bodied Mrs. Retzloff—sober for the first time since I'd met her. Beside her was the girl who had masqueraded as Julia. Beyond, I saw the real Julia Cook, bound hand and foot with some sort of transparent tape, her eyes wide and bright with fear as they sought mine. I did my best to smile encouragingly, but I felt sick and despairing inside.

"A contribution of Mrs. Retzloff's," Foreshall said, holding up a spool of the tape. "It's soluble in water—after three or four hours of immersion. So when you and the girl float out with the tide, on a gasoline-soaked, burning ship, you can take your choice—burn or drown. Either way, the evidence will be destroyed. It will look as though you and the girl tried a get-away in my ship, and met a convenient disaster. Like my obliging chauffeur, Clapp, with the knowledge you have you'll be less harmful dead than alive."

Several lighted lanterns stood along one side of the shed. They were to be put aboard the boat, I supposed, set in some way to act as the initial fuses. The boat itself reeked with gasoline. All of us were on the catwalk on one side of the water-dock, excepting Julia, who lay on the far side. Mrs. Retzloff's thug kept his gun trained on me while Foreshall unwound a few yards of the tape. And then Foreshall made his one slip—he got between the gun and me.

I seized two of the lanterns and leaped, all in a single movement; the gun roared ineffectively

(Continued on page 63)

ASSASSIN IN ARMOR

CHAPTER ONE

Stand By for Murder

"WE CAN'T wait any longer for her, Curt." The program director of WZIL glanced at the sweep second hand of the studio clock. "Have to use the stand-by orchestra. We go on the air in ninety seconds."

Curt Van Ness tightened the ends of his white bow tie, pulled down his white vest. "Hold

There was a comedy reprise at the end of the number, with Curt baritoneing questions and Lana answering, "No—just what we're doing tonight" to each query. She opened her eyes; smiled faintly as the orchestra finished.

While the announcer read his commercial, Curt led her away from the microphone, put his lips to her ear.

"What's wrong with you, trouper?"

"Everything, Curt," she whispered.

Her eyes didn't meet his; she half turned away

By . . . STEWART STERLING

everything. It'll take another thirty seconds for station identification, Dick. Lana'll be here. She's never failed me yet."

Dick Byler scowled in irritation. "If she'd phoned, or let you know. . . ."

They stood beside the elevator bank. Studio guests crowded past them. The second hand on the big clock crawled around to the hour mark.

"No use, Curt. I'll tell the announcer to make the switch—"

"Wait!"

The elevator light glowed.

The car door slid smoothly back. A girl in a shimmering cloak of sequins ran out.

"Curt!" She tilted her head up, smoothed back pale golden hair. "I'm terribly sorry!"

"Save your breath, honey." He took the wrap from her shoulders. "There goes our music cue."

The announcer finished as they hurried to the mike:

"... and here they are; the nation's number one Harmonizers, Lana Revlett and Curt Van Ness—catching the down beat in a question everybody's asking. . . ."

Lana leaned forward. Her lips curved into a smile, but there were tears in her eyes.

Why don't we do this more often—

Just what we're doing, tonight. . . ?

No one tuning in could have told she was crying, but it was clear to Curt the girl was badly upset. It would take a severe shock to jolt Lana out of her normal light-heartedness. He slid an arm around her shoulders as he picked up the melody—

Gee but it's great to get together again. . . .

He felt her shudder. Her eyes were closed.

Why does it only happen now and then. . . ?

She swayed. He held her tighter, squeezed her shoulder. Her face was chalky under the studio spot, but the velvety smoothness of her voice had the same old lilt when she went into the second chorus.

from him and scanned the studio audience. The movement took her out of the protecting circle of his arm; he realized she had intended it that way.

"Can you make it through the show, Lana?"

She touched her handkerchief to her eyes. "Can't let you down . . . on our last show, Curt."

He could scarcely hear her. He saw her stiffen, as she stared at a man in the last row of the studio audience. A thin, spindly individual with a deeply cleft chin.

"Last show?"

What was she getting at? Didn't they have ten more weeks of this contract to run? And after that, hadn't they planned a month in Mexico for the honeymoon?

Lana nodded. She swung on her heel, moved back toward the mike. "Let's make it . . . one to remember."

CURT went through the next number mechanically. It was a good thing they had rehearsed that number fifty times, for all the words he could think of were—"one to remember." That couldn't mean but one thing, could it? You didn't have to remember people who were near you.

He looked for the spindly man. The fellow had twisted sideways, leaned an elbow on the back of his seat, bored. What the hell did he have to do with Lana?

Lana wouldn't answer questions. She had a grip on herself now, but it was an effort for her to go on. The fifteen minutes on the air seemed like an hour to Curt.

The music swelled up to the final crescendo. The announcer tapped the chimes button. The audience applauded, began to straggle out at the insistence of the page boys. Curt caught the girl's arm; he tried to lead her off to one side.

"What's the trouble, Lana?"

She drew a deep breath, like a swimmer about to plunge into icy water. "I'm going to get married."

"Sure you are. To me."

"No, Curt." Her lips were gray with fear; her eyes went to the spindly man, sauntering toward them, hands deep in his pockets. "I'm going to get married to him. Or murdered."

Married—or murdered? What was this? Curt got an arm around her waist, swung her aside. He put himself between her and the man. "What the hell is it all about, Lana?"

The man answered, "One thing it ain't bud. It ain't your party."

Curt put a palm out to hold the man away. The spindly man didn't seem to be disturbed. He didn't take his hands out of his pockets, just leaned forward against Curt's hand.

Lana managed to maneuver between them. "Don't Curt! For God's sake, don't!"

The radio entertainer struggled to get past her. "You think I'm going to let any rat-faced little twerp walk off with you?"

She wasn't appealing to Curt now. She clutched at the other's arm. "No, no. He doesn't understand, Jimmy."

Jimmy eyed Curt malevolently. "I wasn't going to burn him, babe."

She let go of him. The page boys watched the group curiously. Curt dropped his outstretched palm.

"Curt," she managed. "This is Jimmy Scanlon."

Neither man looked at her.

Curt said, "What's your racket, guy?"

Scanlon took one hand out of his pocket, bent over casually, as if to pick up something off the floor. When he straightened, he held his hand out, palm down, toward Curt.

"I guess this belongs to you, mister." His voice was mild, colorless.

Curt made no move to take whatever it was. He had all he could do to keep from swinging on the V-cleft chin. That wouldn't help Lana any. Might hurt her. . . .

Scanlon raised the corners of his eye-brows; their slant gave him a strangely diabolical expression. He turned his hand over, opened the fingers. In the pit of his palm was a brass-jacketed .45 bullet.

"I said it belongs to you, mister." He dropped it casually into his coat pocket. "If you don't want it—that's your business."

One of Curt's big hands shot out, grabbed the lapels of Scanlon's coat, pulled him close—so close there wouldn't be room for any gun-work. Then he spoke.

"What've you been doing to Lana—to scare her this way?"

Scanlon flattened his teeth against his lips, twisted around, struggled to get his right hand free. "You gotta have it, hey? You keep asking for it!"

Lana crowded up against him, bore down on his wrist with both hands. "Please, Jimmy,

please! It'll be all right. Curt just doesn't understand. . . ."

A STRAND of black hair fell damply down over Curt's forehead; sweat stood out on his upper lip. "You're damned right I don't understand. You want to marry this little drip, Lana?"

She sunk teeth into her lower lip, to keep the tears back. "I'm—I'm going to marry him."

"That wasn't what I asked you."

"That's all I can tell you, Curt."

Scanlon had backed away, was re-knotting his necktie.

"It ain't very often," he said, smoothly, "that a lug gets to go on a wedding and a funeral party at the same time, but—" His eyes slitted—"you're in a spot where you could do that, if it so happened you wanted to."

Curt's jaw was grim.

"Lana," he pleaded, "what changed you? You said you were going to marry me."

"I can't . . . now."

The answer was so faint he scarcely understood her.

He tried once more.

"You're not doing this of your own free will, Lana."

She looked at him then, fairly and squarely. "Yes." Her voice was bitter. "I am, Curt. I know what you must be thinking. You're right. About all of it. But this is the way it has to be." She held out her hand. "It's been swell—knowing you."

He took the hand, squeezed it. "Yeah. Swell." He wanted to say something more, but the words wouldn't come. And Scanlon was standing, straddle-legged, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. The man's eyes glittered like a lizard's.

"You coming, babe, or do I have to—?"

"No, no." She ran to him. "I'm coming." She didn't turn around to look at Curt; they hurried out of the studio, toward the elevator.

Curt made a lunge for his coat and hat, went streaking out the rear of the control room. He jabbed the button beside the entertainers' elevator. When the car door opened, he made a grab for the operator's arm.

"Life or death, Mike! Shoot me down, express, huh?"

For answer, the operator jammed the lever over. The car plummeted down.

"Anything a pal can do to help, Mister Van Ness?"

"You wouldn't happen to have a gun on you, would you?"

The elevator man scratched his chin. "They got plenty of 'em up in the sound effects department, but I don't guess they got anything but blank ammunition. That wouldn't be what you'd be needing, huh?"

"No," Curt said, "it wouldn't."

The car stopped. Curt went out on the dead run. He was through the lobby and at the door before the crowd from the guest elevator began emerging. He pulled up his coat collar, jerked down his hat brim. He slid across the street; stood in the shadows of the theatre marquee.

Lana came out, clinging to Scanlon's arm. She held her head high, walked stiffly, like one in a trance. Scanlon hustled her toward a black, rented limousine. There were two other people in the car besides the chauffeur, but Curt couldn't see them from where he stood.

Before the limousine began to move, the singer was flinging open the door of a cab. "See that rental job, up ahead?"

The cab driver said, over his shoulder, "I been looking at it for half an hour. That's the kind of cluck who takes all the profits out of this taxi business."

"Can you follow 'em?"

THE driver got into gear, slid away from the curb, half a block behind the limousine. "Mister, I can follow 'em from here to Montreal, if you got the dough and I got the gas."

They stopped for a traffic light. "It won't be that far—but it might be quite a ways at that. That fellow can make more speed than you can."

"That's what *you* think!" The driver slid back his glass and turned around. "Them flunks ain't permitted to hit it up more than fifty, no matter what. I can get fifty-five out of this beetle."

"Get it," Curt said. "I'll double your fare if we don't lose 'em."

"I'd run 'em off the road for that," the driver said. "You want the radio on?"

"Hell, no." Curt closed his eyes to shut out the sight of that evening cloak in the car ahead. "I've had my bellyful of radio."

They went west to the express highway, then north. The lights of the metropolis swirled beneath them, towered above them. The river was a broad black ribbon sprinkled with gilt reflections beside them. But Curt was thinking neither of the city nor of the river. . . .

He kept seeing Lana's strained face. Curt didn't know a whole lot about her, though they had worked together for many weeks now. He knew she had a little money of her own; that her folks lived somewhere up in Connecticut; that she had gone to Smith, and studied voice abroad; that she was twenty-three, single—and in love with one two-hundred-pound Mid-westerner who had come East to try baritoneing instead of lumber-jacking. He didn't know any of her friends; he had never seen any of her folks; but then, she could have said the same of him. No, nothing Curt Van Ness knew of Lana Revlett would lead him to mistrust her—ever. Least of all, the strange presence of Jimmy Scanlon.

Curt had run up against men of that type

before—in the gambling hells of Wisconsin lumber towns after the spring drives. Men whose muscles were not made to work, and whose minds couldn't seem to think straight. How did Lana manage to get mixed up with a punk like that? Was there something in her past that she hadn't dared to risk exposing? He couldn't dope it out. . . .

They turned east, then north. After an hour, the cab driver said out of the corner of his mouth, "Turnin' off the highway."

"Be careful you don't get too close to them."

"Leave it to me," the driver said. "Whatsamatter? Your mouse givin' you the double-cross?"

Curt scowled. "Somebody is."

The limousine turned a corner, slowed.

"Hey! You know where we are?"

Curt said, "No."

"In Connecticut. Greenwich."

Curt grunted. That could mean only one thing. Lana had said they were going to get married; they couldn't do that in New York State, tonight. This was the answer. Well, one way or another, he'd break it up.

The limousine stopped. The taxi pulled up a hundred yards behind. Four people swarmed out of the black car, past a painted sign illuminated by a floodlight:

Rev. Paul Yelvd

Curt waited until they rang the bell at the neat, white-painted house, disappeared inside.

Then he got out of the cab. He took some bills out of his wallet.

"Stick around; I may be going back with you."

The cab driver sized up his muscular frame. "There's only two guys in that party; you oughta be able to handle 'em."

Curt said, "I ought to."

He strolled casually up to the limousine, put his foot on the running-board to address the chauffeur. "Say, was that Ted Hazen you just dropped off here at the preacher's place?"

The chauffeur studied him blandly. "I really couldn't say, sir. The car was engaged by Mister Daugherty."

"Daugherty? Oh, I guess they're going over to Teddy's place after the ceremony."

"Quite possibly, sir. Mister Daugherty did mention something about Ridgefield."

"That's right."

Curt went briskly up on the porch, made a pretense of ringing the bell, listened to the voices within.

The minister was saying, "Do you, Lana, take this man—"

He stood there for another long minute, until: "If any man know aught why this marriage should not be consummated, let him now step forward or forever after hold his peace."

Curt didn't bother to ring; his hand turned the

knob quietly. He swung the door open, stepped inside.

The minister was standing with his back to the door of the living room, at Curt's right. He stopped reading, turned, peered at the singer over the top of his glasses. Scanlon, holding Lana's hand, stared without expression. Lana opened her mouth as if she meant to scream. Beside her stood a stout woman with fat, sagging, pendulous under her chin. She was dressed in pink; she wore a wide-brimmed pink hat—and she gaped at Curt as if he were an apparition.

THE man who stood on Lana's left was the one who went into action. He was short, stout and bald-headed. His skull rose to a peak at the top and made Curt think of cartoons of Humpty Dumpty. He came forward, beaming, arms outstretched.

"Let him now step forward," repeated the minister, "or forever after—"

Curt said, "This is phoney!"

The minister dropped his glasses on the floor; they shattered. "Bless my soul!"

Daugherty leaped at Curt, grinning from ear to ear. Long ape arms circled the baritone's body.

Daugherty roared, "We knew you'd try to pull one of your gags on us, old boy!"

Curt brought a hand up, pushed it in Daugherty's face. The man ducked back; his left arm pinned Curt's arms to his sides.

The bald-headed man's right hand went into his coat pocket, came out with a black sock, which looked as if the toe had been stuffed with paper.

Curt pushed him back, but the man's arm flashed out. The sock came down in a short, swift arc. It landed just behind Curt's ear.

The last thing he heard, as the room dissolved into blackness, was Lana's scream:

"Don't hurt him! Don't!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Men of Steel

A STRANGE *beep-beep-beep* cut through his consciousness. For a few seconds he couldn't recall where he was; then he realized that he was still in the minister's house. But the *beep-ing* was the taxi horn, on the street outside.

His eyes began to focus. He got his knees underneath him. The floor tilted and sagged away, nauseatingly, but he forced himself to a sitting position. There was something in his right hand; he held it closer. It was the black sock, weighted with sand. But it wasn't all black now; there was a glistening patch of dull

garnet on one side. He felt of his head; it ached splittingly. There was a lump as big as a walnut behind his ear, but there was no blood on the back of his neck.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a pair of bedroom slippers. He turned his head slowly. Legs, clad in clerical black; a black coat, arms twisted grotesquely, with the fingers stiffened like talons! The back of the minister's head was crushed to a crimson jelly, with a rivulet of pulpy gray trickling down over one ear. Curt struggled to keep from retching, stared at the thing in his hand.

It was this makeshift sandbag that had bashed in the Reverend Yelvd's skull. He dropped the weighted sack with a shiver of revulsion.

He bent over the minister. The man had not been able to put up any fight. His glasses lay beneath his head, smashed; the ritual book was still in his hand.

The taxi's *beep-beep* cut through the darkness again. Curt went out to the hall. He was still dizzy; his ears rang; the light was blurry to his eyes.

He called, knew there would be no answer. If there had been anyone in the house besides the Reverend Yelvd, the place would be swarming with bluecoats.

He left the lights on, went to the door. Something gleamed at his feet. He picked it up. A sequin, from Lana's cloak. They had done their best, Scanlon and Daugherty, to pin the murder on Curt. Had they also meant to implicate the girl? What was the answer? What was the purpose of this obscure and needless violence?

He went out. The taxi driver hailed him: "How you buzz'n', cousin?"

Curt shook his head. "They gave me the old kayo; I took the count."

"If I'd've known, I'd've come in an' got you. I wondered why you was stayin', after the party broke up."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Five, ten minutes. No chance of catchin' up with 'em now."

"No." Curt got in, leaned against the cushions. "How you feel about running over to Ridge-field?"

"That where they went, Mister Van Ness?"

"That's what the chauffeur said." So the driver knew him; that might be a break, if this unholy trio that had shanghaied Lana into this wedding were to be outwitted.

The cab tore over a winding, black road; up steep hills, down sharp gradients.

"You got any idea where the party is heading?" The driver kept the speedometer up to fifty.

"Only guesswork. When we get to the town, we'll ask if anyone knows whether the Revletts have a place there."

THE cab raced on through the night. Facts began to arrange themselves in Curt's mind. Lana was Mrs. James Scanlon, now—whether Curt liked it or not. Maybe he didn't have the right to cause Lana the heartache that would be sure to follow police investigation of the minister's murder. On the other hand, he didn't have the right to leave her alone with a killer like that, did he? And, whatever it was Scanlon, Daugherty and Company were after, they apparently had very definite ideas about how to get it. The arrangements at Greenwich must have been very carefully made, in advance.

They slowed for inquiries at a garage on the Ridgefield road. Did the Revletts have a place in town? They sure did—and what a place! How far was it?

"Coupla miles, on the right hand side. Go down a road till you come to a couple of big iron gates. The estate must cover two, three hundred acres, anyway."

The driver said, "Thanks."

They rolled on. Presently the cabbie called back, "It ain't none of my business, chum, but is this dame you're shagging after the same one sings on your program?"

Curt said, "That's right. Lana Revlett."

"Then I don't blame you."

The cab halted at the top of a rise. Off to the left, on the crest of the next hill, the dark silhouette of a huge country place loomed against the night. It was stone, built in the French chateau style; all steeply slanting roofs and a great crenellated tower. There were lights through mullioned windows—a warm and cheerful glow at this distance.

"Gee whiz!" the driver let the car coast downhill. "Her old man must have quite some considerable cookies; that's one of them houses jack built. Plenty jack."

"You game to stick around some more?"

The cab jockey grinned. "You go on about your business; you'll find me standing by for station identification."

They pulled up in front of a huge stone gateway. One of the stone piers at the gate was a dozen feet square; a gateman's lodge.

The taxi honked. A bulky, barrel-chested man, in olive drab uniform with leather puttees and a Sam Browne belt, stepped quickly from the gateman's cubby-hole. The walnut butt of a revolver projected from a holster on his right hip.

"What y' want?"

Curt stuck his head out the window. "Miss Lana Revlett."

"She ain't here."

Curt got out. He walked up to the front bumper of the taxi. Ahead of the cab, running straight through the now closed gates, were the wide marks of the limousine's tires.

"Lana just came in here with a party," he insisted. "I have to see her. It's important."

The gateman swaggered over, put his face close to the iron grating. "You wouldn't be trying to tell me my business, would you, skipper?"

Curt growled, "Hell, yes! Unless you're in with this crooked crowd. . . ."

The man shook his head. "I don't know what crowd you're talking about. There ain't been anybody here all evening."

The singer scowled. "Have it your own way. I'm going back to get the police."

The gateman grinned "Hop right to it, skipper. There ain't any local cops. And if you can find a state trooper this time of night, you're better than okay. Besides, there ain't anything in here the authorities aren't welcome to peek at, any time."

The cab backed, turned. As the gears ground into high, Curt called softly to the driver, "Hold it!"

The cab slid to a sudden stop.

Curt stared off at the house a couple of hundred feet distant. In an upper window light had flashed suddenly. Not the soft, glowing light from the mullioned windows, but the brilliant, actinic glitter from thousands of mirror-like sequins.

So Lana Revlett wasn't here, eh? It wasn't much of a surprise to verify what he already suspected. The thing that gave him a tingle of apprehension was those windows. He could only see the lighted ones, of course; all those that were lighted had dark horizontal and vertical lines penciled against them. They were barred, like the windows of a prison!

IT WAS incredible—Lana held captive in her own home! But then the whole thing was fantastic. Curt could understand now why the girl had been forced into marriage. The forbidding outlines of the great chateau, the high stone wall which surrounded the estate, the armed guard—all these spoke of money in the millions. But how Lana had been forced into this hideous wedding; why she had permitted Scanlon to spirit her away, was still as much of a puzzle as ever.

Curt said, "Go ahead, driver."

After the cab had gone half a mile, the singer said, "That girl's in a jam, my friend. You game to help her?"

The driver slammed on his brakes. "Mister, I've heard you and Miss Revlett on my five-tube, many's the time. With me you're okay. I'll stick my neck out a ways if it don't lose me my cab or win nobody my insurance."

"You don't have to mix into it," Curt agreed. "Just turn around; cut off the road and drive your cab up beside that fence."

The taximan did as he was told. Curt got out and climbed to the top of the cab. From there he could step over the bits of jagged, broken

glass on top of the high wall. The cab driver scrambled out, held something up.

"If you ain't got a gun on you, Mister Van Ness, maybe this would come in handy."

Curt took it. It was a wrench. It felt good in his hand.

"Thanks, pal."

"What you want me to do now?" asked the taxi man.

"Stand by, fella. Just stand by. If you don't hear anything or see anything in half an hour, go hunt for a flock of state cops."

Curt kept low as he crawled over the fence. He was a quarter of a mile from the gates where the armed guard had watched them.

He dropped lightly to the turf. The lawn here was terraced in wide, sweeping waves, swelling up to the mansion at the crest of the hill. But the grounds were studded with little groves of evergreens, summer houses, a long arbor. He had no difficulty keeping in the shadow most of the way to the huge, sprawling stone structure. Curt hadn't appreciated its size from the vantage point of the road; it was as big as a castle.

He started to circle the house, found he couldn't. Along the west and to the rear of the house there was nothing but a steep retaining wall.

He went the other way. There were out-buildings here—a long garage, stables and a row of forbidding kennels from which came the ominous clanking of dog chains.

Curt looked up at the window where he had seen Lana's cloak. There were no vines climbing up along the moss-green wall, no convenient rain-spout or wiring by which an agile intruder could get up to that second floor.

He stooped, picked up some fragments of crushed stone, tossed them against the barred pane. He had taken the precaution of crouching behind a dense growth of rhododendron. He congratulated himself grimly on having done so when a face appeared suddenly at the grilled window. It wasn't Lana; it was the stout woman who had been with Daugherty in the limousine and at the minister's. She stayed at the window a long time, peering down onto the darkness of the lawn. Presently she went away.

THERE was no sound from within the chateau, but lights flashed on and off in distant wings. Shadows paraded grotesquely across the windows.

Out of the darkness, fifty feet away, a red pinpoint of light glowed suddenly. Curt squinted. A cigarette! Behind it he made out the shadowy outlines of the limousine. Of course! They wouldn't have taken the chauffeur inside with them; he wasn't in on the deal.

Curt took off his hat and coat, stood up and shoved the wrench in the pocket of his dinner jacket. He took out a cigarette, lit it casually as he strolled across the drive toward the parked car.

A dozen feet from the car, he said, "Mister Daugherty wants you to drive me back to the village."

The chauffeur recognized him then. "You, sir? I don't understand. . . . How did you get here? I haven't seen any car drive up."

Curt laughed—he was only three or four feet from the driver's window now. "We parked down by the gate-house. I walked up."

"There's something peculiar about this," the chauffeur said. He lifted his hand, poised it over the horn button. "I think I'd better—"

He didn't finish. Curt's fist flashed out, caught him on the angle of the jaw.

Curt followed it by lunging through the window, smashing at the man with the heavy end of the wrench. The chauffeur subsided.

Curt stood stock still, listening. There was no sound to indicate anyone had heard him. He dragged the man out of the car, threw him over one shoulder and carried him back to the rhododendron thicket.

Five minutes later Curt stood up in the chauffeur's uniform and puttees. The outfit was a little tight for him, but it would do.

Curt went back to the car, taking no trouble to conceal himself this time. He unlocked the rear compartment. There were tools, jacks, pumps. He picked up a pump, looked at it for a moment, then unscrewed the rubber hose from the metal base. He took the gasoline cap off, inserted the hose and sucked at the other end until he tasted the gasoline. Then he let the hose fall limply, so that one end was inside the tank; the other siphoned a steady stream of liquid to the gravel.

When enough had accumulated, Curt backed away, lit a match and tossed it. There was a puff of blue flame, a streak of orange, and then the whole of the car became one livid mass of light.

The front door of the house opened; a shaft of illumination cut across the tiled portico. A bulky, long-armed figure showed for an instant—Daugherty!

A voice, directly at Curt's back, made him jump.

"Hey! What the hell!" It was the guard. He had seen the flames, and had come running up the driveway. The man had his gun drawn. For an instant Curt thought he was going to be drilled by a bullet. Then he realized that the guard hadn't recognized him.

Curt pointed to the ground, a little ahead of him, to the dismantled tire pump. "If you could get that. . . ."

The guard ran in. He was five feet from Curt before he saw his mistake. "Hey, you ain't—"

In that split-second Curt dived for him, swinging the wrench. He caught the man between the eyes. The gun exploded, but the bullet rang against the metal back of the limousine. Before the guard had touched the ground

Curt had the pistol, was running toward the house.

BEHIND him, the tank blew up with a dull, thunderous rumble. Daugherty, on the threshold, turned, called something back into the chateau. Then he came out, holding an automatic stiffly in front of him.

Curt knew he might have been riddled before he could reach the man, but he knew Daugherty couldn't see clearly, his eyes being used to the inside light.

He got right up to Daugherty, who was bellowing, "Get an extinguisher and put it out, you damn fool!"

Curt jammed the guard's revolver into the fat man's short ribs.

"Drop the gun," Curt commanded.

Daugherty's fingers relaxed. The automatic tumbled to the gravel. Curt recovered it.

"Turn around."

Daugherty did so.

"Now march! Straight inside."

"You get more than a step in front of me, mister, and I'll put a slug right between your shoulder blades. I don't mind shooting a mug like you in the back."

Daugherty mumbled, "You don't get the picture, pal. We ain't doin' your girl any harm."

"You'd better not." Curt tapped him on the skull with the muzzle of the automatic.

There was nobody in the long entrance hall of the chateau. A fire crackled in a six-foot stone fireplace. Hats and coats had been thrown hastily on a long oaken bench, but there was no one around.

"Where are they, Daugherty?"

The bald man nodded. "Big room, there at the right. Armory or something."

"Go ahead. Keep close in front of me."

They went, Indian file, across a wide corridor and through a pair of squat iron doors.

"That's enough," Curt said.

They were at the entrance to a long, high-vaulted hall, occupying the eastern wing of the chateau. Hand-hewn rafters threw black shadows on the arched underside of the roof. A row of leaded panes ran along the outer wall; opposite them was a row of suits of armor mounted on polished pedestals.

The walls were hung with blazoned banners, silk pennons, a tattered battle flag. And at the far end of the room, lined up against a row of burnished shields, were three servants—a young girl in a green uniform with freshly starched cuffs; an old man in knee-breeches and the ruff neckpiece of the English country manor butler; a white-haired woman in a black dress, with a silver chain for keys around her neck. In front of them, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, was Jimmy Scanlon. He didn't change his position, merely turned his head when Daugherty came in with Curt at his back.

Curt snapped, "Over there—against the wall with the others, rat."

Scanlon raised his gun, as if to chance a shot, but Daugherty stopped him.

"God, no! Don't Jimmy!"

Curt said, "Drop the gun and get over there or I'll let you have it!"

Scanlon moved. He let the automatic in his right hand drop. The baritone waggled his revolver at the old man.

"You. What's your name?"

"Thurman, sir."

"You Mister Revlett's butler?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pick up that gun."

The butler stepped forward, retrieved the weapon. He didn't seem to know what to do with it.

"All right now." Curt shoved Daugherty further along the hall. "Where's Miss Revlett?"

Scanlon tightened his lips against his teeth. "Mrs. Jimmy Scanlon, if it's all the same to you."

"It isn't," Curt gritted. He tapped Daugherty on the shoulder. "Lie down. Face down."

Daugherty obeyed. Curt walked over to Scanlon.

"What have you done with her?"

Scanlon spat at him. "Try and find out!"

Curt belted him across the jawbone; the front sight of the automatic tore a gash in Scanlon's cheek. The man bared his fangs like an animal at bay, but not a sound came from him.

The cry was from the maid. "I know where Lana is."

"Where?"

"Upstairs. In the rose room. That other woman made her go up there."

Curt motioned to the girl. "You . . . what's your name?"

"I'm Jeanette, sir."

"Go on upstairs, Jeanette. If you have any trouble bringing Lana down here, tell that fat-faced biddy that I'll put two slugs where they'll hurt the most. One in Scanlon; the other in her friend, Daugherty. Go on. Hurry."

THE girl ran. Scanlon might have been a statue for all he moved—a statue with glittering, obsidian eyes, boring into Curt. Suddenly a piercing scream shattered the quietness of the house.

"Quick!" Jeanette screeched. "Come quick! They're killing her!"

Curt motioned to the old man. "Keep your gun on this guy. Don't let him get close to you. Shoot him the same as you would a mad dog. He'll kill you if you give him a break."

He ran to Daugherty, got a hand inside the man's collar and yanked him to his feet. "Up on your pins!" He propelled the bald man violently toward the foot of the stairs.

They stumbled up. Ten feet from the top of

the flight there was a shimmer of light above Curt's head. He glanced up. A white, glittering cloud settled down over his head. *The sequin cloak!*

He twisted, pushed Daugherty forward and rolled to one side. But the evening wrap fell over him like the enveloping wings of a bird, blinded him.

In that moment Daugherty kicked out. His heel caught Curt's throat, paralyzed him with pain. At the same instant, something hard and cold pressed against the back of the singer's neck.

The fat woman inquired shrilly, "Shall I kill him, Egghead?"

Jeanette's voice came dimly through the folds of the sequin-covered cloth. "Shoot him, shoot him! He hit Jimmy, didn't he?"

Daugherty stopped it. He got his hand on the automatic, twisted it away from Curt's grasp.

"Leave him be. If anybody's going to bump him, Jimmy'll want that pleasure."

CHAPTER THREE

Payment in Blood

THE pressure of the gun behind Curt's ear increased. His revolver was taken from him. A savage heel caught him in the temple, rolled him downstairs, half strangled in the folds of the cloak.

Egghead Daugherty stripped the fabric from the baritone's neck and shoulders and brought him to his feet by the simple expedient of smashing down on his knee-cap with the butt of the .45.

Curt leaned weakly against the newel post at the foot of the stairs. He was still half dazed from the blow on his throat. Across the corridor there was a blur of movement in the great hall.

"Get in there!" Daugherty grated.

Before Curt had staggered a dozen steps, there was a cry behind him.

"Curt! They've hurt you!"

He half turned. Lana rushed to him but was grabbed from behind by the fat woman.

"You gotta remember you're married to Jimmy now," she shrieked. "You can't be making plays for every good-looking gobo you see."

Curt managed to shamle forward enough to satisfy Daugherty while twisting around sufficiently to convince himself that Lana hadn't been injured—so far. That she would escape some sort of violence on this, her wedding night, Curt Van Ness doubted.

The fat woman half pushed, half dragged Lana into the great hall. Scanlon was bending over the still figure of the butler. He stood up, came over to Lana with a jerky, stiff-legged walk.

"You and your boy friend got yourself in up to here, babe." He pointed to his neck. "First

he knocks off that preacher, and then you use a gun on your own butler."

Lana's knees buckled; she pitched forward in a dead faint.

Curt raged, "You can't get away with this frame. They'll get you for that other killing too."

Scanlon smiled, evilly. "Keep your finger on the trigger, Egghead. I'm goin' to give Big Boy a lesson on how to handle a frau." He stooped, put his fist under Lana's chin, forced her head up. Then he slapped her face with the flat of his palm as hard as he could.

Curt lunged forward; a smash across the ear from Daugherty's gun stopped him.

The girl opened her eyes, stared blankly at her husband.

"All right now," Scanlon's voice was brittle. "One last chance, babe. Where's your father?"

Curt could see her lips form the words: "I don't know."

"It's damn funny you wouldn't know. He was here earlier tonight, when I buzzed Jeanette."

The maid came over beside Jimmy, twined her arms around his waist and leaned her head on his shoulder. "The old man's in this house somewhere, Jimmy darling. I've watched; Mister Revlett didn't go out."

Daugherty growled, "You shouldn't've killed old Thurman, Jimmy. Probably he could've told us where the hiding place was."

"Say!" Scanlon scowled. "Where did that damned old crow disappear to?"

For the first time Curt noticed that the housekeeper had vanished.

Jeanette said, "She's probably locked herself in the bathroom. She hasn't sense enough to cause any trouble. And I'm sure she doesn't know old Revlett's hide-away hole."

"Mrs. Scanlon knows," Scanlon said gently. "And she'll tell me, unless she wants to watch me go to work on her boy friend, there."

Lana wet her lips with her tongue. "I tell you I don't know."

"Okay." Scanlon was cheerful. "Shove him over here."

Curt was pushed forward until he was only a yard from Lana.

"You wanta watch this, babe. I'm goin' to put a slug in him where it'll hurt so bad he'll beg me to finish him."

Lana moaned and shut her eyes.

"Then I'll leave him lay that way a while," Scanlon went on calmly. "If you decide to loosen up, I'll put him out of his misery." He swung his pistol around until it pointed a little below the bottom button on Curt's vest.

The baritone said, "You must be all coked up, fella. If it's money you're after, what good'll it do you to have every cop in the country on your tail?"

Scanlon laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh.

"They been after me for three years, Van Ness; they ain't put the arm on me yet. Anyhow, what difference does it make to you? You won't be around to care." He swung toward Lana.

"Up to you, babe. This guy or the old man. Which do you—"

The lights went out. There was no click, no warning. Suddenly the room was plunged into darkness.

Instinctively Curt dived to one side, hit the floor rolling.

Then a wildcat pounced on him, clung to him, kicking, clawing, gouging. Jeanette, the French maid!

"Here he is, Jimmy. I've got him. Let me have your gun, Jimmy. I'll fix him!"

Her knee caught Curt in the groin, doubled him up. Long fingernails lacerated his cheeks. He wrenched his face away, rolled over. For an instant she was underneath him, then on top again, stabbing at his eyes with her thumb tips.

"What's the matter, Jimmy?" she began. Then she was quiet.

IN THE deep gloom of the armory there was a curious, breathless silence. The only illumination came from the door at the far end, leading into the corridor. It made a pool of light on the wide, open boards. Halfway down the hall Curt could see only vague outlines of Scanlon, Daugherty, the fat woman, Lana on her knees. They were all facing the same direction, all looking at something.

Curt clamped his hands on Jeanette's wrists, turned to look.

They were transfixed before the central figure in the row of armor exhibits. This was a knight in full armor, with its great helm of polished steel, the hauberk of ringed chain-mail. In its right hand it grasped the heavy head of a giant battleaxe whose staff rested beside the sharp-pointed steel boots on the polished mount.

Daugherty went toward it. "Got you where you can't get away this time, Revlett."

He thrust his automatic out at arms length, held it out until the muzzle touched the open grille over the mouth plate.

Lana whispered, "Dad! Dad!"

The fat woman gasped, "It hasn't any legs, Eggy! See!" She pointed to the gap between the lower edge of the hauberk skirt and the top of the leg guards—there was a good three inches of open space through which they could see the paneling of the wall behind.

Daugherty laughed. "You've pulled all the trick stuff you're going to, Revlett. . . . So long!"

The automatic roared. The flash was reflected from the polished surface of the battleaxe; the bullet ricocheted off the inside of the helm.

And then the right arm of the armored figure

shot out swiftly. The long curved blade of the axe caught Daugherty square in the center of the forehead. The sound of metal gashing through bone was sickening.

And Egghead Daugherty died.

The impact sent Daugherty over backwards; he lay spread-eagled on the floor. Curt could see the dark torrent oozing out from the frightful wound in the central part of the skull. He stepped between the corpse and Lana.

Scanlon misunderstood the movement, whirled on him.

But Jeanette cried, "Look out! the axe Jimmy!"

Jimmy leaped aside. It wasn't the axe this time; it was the whole huge figure of armor. It teetered forward—then collapsed with a tremendous clashing of metal at Scanlon's feet. The helm rolled off; the open back of the suit of mail lay exposed. *There was no one in it!*

CURT couldn't believe his eyes. He hadn't been more than a dozen feet from that figure when the axe blade had curved down toward Daugherty's head.

Scanlon seized the blood-smeared axe and went lunging ferociously at the next pedestaled figure.

Then the spindly man went storming up and down the armorial display.

Curt inched along toward the body of the bald-headed man. The fat woman was on her knees beside Daugherty, uttering little senseless cries, like a hurt animal. If the baritone could just edge a little closer, he could make a lunge for that gun lying under the dead man's legs.

The spindly man was a raving maniac now, slashing and cutting at the mounted figures, until only the one nearest the corridor remained standing.

Curt dropped swiftly to one knee, bent over.

Jeanette's squeal of warning cut through the gloom like a knife.

"Edyth! He's going for the gun!"

Curt lunged out for the weapon. So did the fat woman. They reached it together. The pudgy hand clasped the butt; Curt gripped the barrel. He wrenched at it mightily, but Edyth had clasped both her hands around the grip, twined her fingers, held on. He put his back and shoulders into one final heave—and slipped in the widening pool of blood.

But he had the gun. He steadied himself, braced his elbow on one knee and sighted along the barrel. He pulled the trigger. There was no answering buck of the weapon, no spurt of flame. The magazine was empty.

A figure came rushing at him. White hands and face—and a sharply-pointed spear tip that caught the light from the corridor! Jeanette—determined to finish him with the lethal pike!

He flung himself sideways and scrambled to his feet. The long shaft hurtled through the

air, caught the shoulder of his coat. He reeled back, tripped over the steel helm and lay gasping for breath, powerless to move.

Jeanette came for him again. This time Lana grappled with her, clinging to the long handle of the pike.

Scanlon rasped, "Let me handle this, Jeanette. He's no good to us dead."

Lana cried, "Let him go! Let Curt go! I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Scanlon snatched the pike from Jeanette's hand. He put one foot on Curt's neck so the singer could scarcely breathe. Then he forced the pike-tip between the baritone's teeth.

"Okay, babe." Scanlon beckoned to Lana. "If your old man don't show up here in one minute, I'm leaning on this gimmick. That point'll go right through the top of Van Ness's head." To emphasize his words, he did lean on the shaft a little. And though Curt got both hands around the spear-tip, the razor-edged steel forced itself between his teeth, and warm blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

LANA, in desperation, whirled, started for the corridor. Jeanette tore after her like a wildcat, clung to her.

Lana threw back her head and called, "Dad! Dad, where are you?"

Like the hollow tones of the sepulchre, the answer came:

"Here, Lana."

The voice was calm and quiet, yet it was indistinct, muffled.

But there was no doubt it was here in the great hall. Scanlon relaxed his pressure on the pike for an instant. Curt arched his back like a wrestler, rolled over. As the spear-tip slid across his cheek like a searing iron, he heard the voice again. Scanlon dropped the pike, pulled out his automatic and aimed it at the gloomy shadows, backing around in a circle.

"Ask Mrs. Waldron to switch on the lights again, Lana." The voice seemed to come first from up in the rafters, then from the floor.

Lana shouted, "Mother Waldron! Put on the lights!"

The overhead chandelier sprang into brilliance again. There was no one in the armory save the three women and Scanlon, Curt saw. The butler's body lay sprawled at the far end of the room; Daugherty's gruesome cadaver was stretched out in the center, with Edyth still crouched at his side.

"You have been looking for me, James Scanlon?"

By some curious trick of the ear, Curt knew where the voice came from now. It was that last and only standing suit of mail—a great harness of blued steel, with long spiked elbows and rowelled spurs. The visored grille in the helm was up, but no face was visible. Yet Curt knew Lana's father was inside that suit of armor.

"It has been a long trail, Scanlon," the voice intoned again, "and you have come to the end of it. You have pushed many others over the brink; you stand now on the precipice yourself."

The right gauntlet of the armored knight clanked out to the horizontal. Under it appeared a hand. And in the hand, the nicked barrel of a revolver.

SCANLON fired from the hip. The bullet rang loudly against the steel corselet. The man inside the suit of armor laughed.

Still, Curt could not see his face. But the outstretched pistol levelled. A long, thin finger of flame stabbed out from the muzzle.

If it found its mark, there was no indication from Scanlon, for he fired back. The helm of the armored knight jerked sideways suddenly. A splotch of lead showed against the dull blue.

Revlett didn't laugh this time, but slowly, with infinite pain, he stretched out one of the sharp-pointed steel shoes, feeling for the floor in front of the pedestal. It was an effort for him to dismount from the stand.

Scanlon fired at him, again and again. But the armor clanked; the figure swayed and bent stiff-jointedly to the floor. Then it turned, and with a curious rustling sound made by the rings of the chain-mail, it began to shuffle toward Scanlon.

Curt had started to get to his feet, but Jeanette, standing beside him, had picked up the pike Scanlon had dropped. She jabbed the baritone with it now, savagely. The fat woman had slumped, unconscious, over Egghead's grisly corpse. Lana was crouched down behind the pedestal from which her father had stepped, to avoid the hail of lead which was spattering through the armor. Curt stared, as if hypnotized, at the grim figure out of the past as it stalked with painful slowness down the hall, toward Scanlon.

Revlett spoke again. "I have lived in fear on your account, James Scanlon."

The gun in the knight's hand exploded, and Scanlon yelled in pain.

"And now, because of you, I go to my death, unafraid."

Scanlon flung himself flat on the floor, and fired over one of the pedestals. "You lived in fear, you rat! We died a living death because of you, and you lived off the fat of the land. Well, it's my turn now. I'll live on you—or on your bones after you're gone."

The pistol in the knight's hand clicked; the last shot had been fired! But Revlett's pace did not slacken. He dropped the gun carelessly on the floor, reached with deliberate slowness around to the broad-sword hooked to his belt. He had to use both hands on the hilt to hold it. He poised it in front of him, as if it were a candle and he an altar boy. Then he kept moving, relentlessly, toward the wounded man

who was now feverishly reloading his automatic behind the shelter of the pedestal.

Lana cried, "Look out, father! Behind you!"

It was Jeanette. She was tearing across the hall toward her employer, the pike pointed out in front of her. Her hair streamed wildly behind her; her eyes blazed.

Revlett took two slow, pirouetting steps, slashed once with the sword. He severed the pike shaft and knocked the broken weapon out of the girl's hand. She shrank back fearfully.

And at that instant Scanlon's automatic spat. Once! Twice! Three times!

THE knight tottered, managed to turn, took a few slow halting steps toward the pedestal—and sank gently to his knees. The killer's bullet had caught him in the back, where the chain-mail was lightest.

On the floor near Curt lay a mace—a four-foot oaken club, six inches in diameter at one end, tapering to a point at the other. The bludgeon end was studded with sharp, heavy, steel spikes. Curt got his hands on it. It was heavy, heavier than the double-bitted axes he had swung, back there in the Wisconsin woods. But it felt good between his palms; he knew how to use a thing like this.

He turned, went striding toward Scanlon. The man was sitting on the floor now. He had one hand pressed against the pit of his stomach; his face was twisted up into a contortion of agony. But he could still use the gun.

When Curt was ten feet away Scanlon fired. The baritone staggered. There was a numb feeling in his right arm; he couldn't swing the mace properly. Maybe he could hurl it accurately enough to knock out that rat-eyed devil!

He swung it as far as he could. It fell short. He stood there, reeling helplessly, while Scanlon held his automatic up in front of him with both hands and squinted at Curt over the sight.

For a fleeting second, the spindly man grinned tightly. Curt braced himself for the shock. He heard the flat crack of the explosion—and was surprised to find himself still on his feet.

Then a sharp voice from the corridor barked, "Freeze right where you are! All of you!"

Curt turned his head. There were two stocky men in motor cycle breeches and puttees. They each held long-barreled Police Positive revolvers—and from the muzzle of one, a spiral of smoke trickled upward.

Curt looked at Scanlon. The man was leaning back against the pedestal, and his mouth sagged open. The gun dangled from limp fingers.

The state troopers came into the armory.

Behind them was the housekeeper.

One trooper came over to Curt. "What is this, a slaughter house? Which one snapped the switch on the minister down in Greenwich?"

Curt shrugged. "Might've been Egghead

Daugherty, there—the one with his head split open. Or more likely Jimmy Scanlon, the one you cooled off, just in time to save my life."

"It was Scanlon," Lana said dully. "He wanted you to be suspected, Curt. He thought it would keep you out of his way for a while, until he got settled up here."

"Looks like he wasn't so bright," the cop answered. "We had a phone call from the Greenwich police. The last name on the register at the Reverend Yelvd's was Lana Revlett, of Ridgefield. We came right out here. There was a taxi driver outside who tipped us off there was trouble going on."

Mrs. Waldron spoke up. "I—I let them in. I didn't dare to do anything more, Miss Lana. I was afraid."

Lana held her father's hand. "We were all afraid, Mother Waldron. I feel as if I'd aged a hundred years tonight."

THE trooper stooped, slid back the visor of Revlett's helm. "What in God's name is the idea of the black velvet over his face? Was he trying to smother himself?"

The housekeeper answered. "I made it for him. There were eye-slits in it so he could see out through the armor, but nobody could see him from the room."

"You're lying," Jeanette husked. "He was in that other suit, the one there with the axe. He killed Mister Daugherty. How he got out of it, into that other one, I don't know, but—"

Curt squatted beside the figure that had held the deadly axe. "There wasn't anyone in this suit. Nothing but this. . . ." He held up a thin strip of steel spring. "This had been stuck inside the right arm of the suit, to hold it out against the axe. Daugherty fired at the figure. His bullet ricocheted; it broke off the end of the spring. See here . . . ? When it was released, it shot the arm out. Egghead didn't know it, but he committed suicide."

Curt put his arm around Lana. "I don't understand any of it, Lana, but if you don't want to talk about it—"

"Ain't a question of what she wants," the first trooper interrupted. "What the hell you think we're gonna do, wait around till somebody feels like explaining what all this multiple homicide is about?"

Lana pulled herself together. "I don't know, except that—" Curt could feel her trembling; he knew that she was lying. She did know. That meant it was something she couldn't bear to have the world know about her father. Well, he'd do what he could to help her out.

"It looks to me," he said, "like a couple of thugs who used to know Mister Revlett decided that the best way to get hold of his money was to marry his daughter. So Scanlon did that."

(Continued on page 64)



WHEREVER THE GRAFT GROWS

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

IN THE past year it had been remarked by those who worked at the city hall that a change had come over Police Chief Fred Ireland. Oh, he looked about the same as he had for the past ten years. He was still grizzled, and he still shaved twice a day with a straight razor and nicked himself as frequently. He was wearing the same wide suspenders of blue elastic that had faded to match his eyes.

"It isn't a physical change," Irene, the old maid in the treasurer's office, would say. She would look out of the window and become dreamy-eyed over her own philosophy. "It's as though he had drawn back into his shell to take an inventory of his life."

If that was what Chief Ireland was up to, the inventory seemed not entirely satisfactory; for he groused a good deal, especially to the city fathers

to whom he owed, after all, his living for a good many years.

"The old man don't talk so much," Patrolman Benny Kane said. "Oh, us on the force hear plenty of the old baloney about a true copper never being alloyed, and that prize one about wherever the graft grows you'll find some dishonest public servant fattening himself for slaughter. We get our sermons, all right. But what about the Y.M.C.A.? What about the Character Builders, and the luncheon clubs, and the Sunday Forum?"

There had been a time when desperate program committees could always count on Chief Ireland to fill in a blank spot. But not any more.

"Somebody took the wind out of his sails," Sergeant Rourke said. "Which was quite some take."

The cops laughed. There were four of them in the hall of the police station located in the city hall basement. They were waiting, presumably, for crime to rear its ugly head, which it seldom did in the town and then not obviously.

Mike Kimmel killed his cigarette on the floor and said that maybe he had something to do with the change in the Old Man.

"At least it was about a year ago that he had me on the carpet for taking a couple of baseball tickets from Luke Yantine. Luke's tavern was on my beat, and the tickets were a gift. I told the Old Man off."

"How's that?" Benny Kane asked.

"Hell, he gave me one of his sermons, and when he got to the point where he said how he always leaned over backwards to be honest, I said, 'I always thought you walked that way to counter-balance your belly.'"

Everybody laughed except Johnny Proskauer. Johnny was the new man on the force. Ever since he was four years old and his mother had died, he had been living with Chief Ireland, so naturally he was a little sensitive about any unkind remarks pointed at the chief.

Johnny Proskauer looked at Kimmel's dished-in blond face, and asked, "What'd the Old Man do?"

"He didn't do anything," Mike said. "I'd figured him right, the old wind bag."

Johnny was on Mike's left, both men leaning up against the wall. Rourk and Kane were sitting on a bench.

"And he didn't do anything?" Johnny asked quietly.

"Hell no!" Kimmel snorted.

"Must have been an oversight," Johnny said, and stepped away from the wall to face Mike Kimmel.

Kimmel was four inches taller than Johnny. He looked something like a farm hand the sun hadn't touched for a generation. Johnny Proskauer was dark and small-boned, as lean through the waist as a girl in a fashion plate.

Enough time elapsed for Mike Kimmel to see that Johnny didn't like what Mike had said and that he intended to remedy the Old Man's oversight.

Altogether, the interval amounted to about four seconds.

Then Johnny fainted with his right arm hooked his left to Mike Kimmel's jaw. There was a good solid connecton, and Mike went down. He got up again, however, in something of a hurry. There was a flurry of body blows before Rourk and Kane stepped in to drag them apart. Johnny shook his black hair out of his eyes, and there was Chief Ireland standing in the door, glaring at them.

"Kimmel and Proskauer, get to my office," the Old Man cracked. Then he heeled around and, preceded by his paunch, stepped across the

hall. Johnny and Mike followed, giving each other glances with dagger points.

IN THE chief's office there was a sermon about cooperation among public officials, which was what made city, state and nation what they were today. Johnny Proskauer didn't pay much attention, because during the six months he had been in the service he had heard the same lecture twice before. He thought possibly Mike Kimmel wasn't hearing either, since Mike had been on the force five years. After it was over, Mike and Johnny shook hands, saluted, and went to the door, Mike leading.

"Uhm—just a minute, Proskauer."

Johnny turned around.

"Yes, sir," he said, and the Old Man gestured to Johnny to shut the door after Mike had passed through. Johnny closed the door. The Old Man sat at his desk and blew his nose. When he took his handkerchief away from his face, there was blood on it from a recent razor cut on the chin.

"Must have nicked myself," Ireland muttered.

He got up and went to his private lavatory, leaving the door open behind him. He tore off a piece of toilet paper and pressed it over the cut on his face. Then he came back to his desk, sat down, looked at Johnny.

"My wife's a wonderful woman," he said.

Johnny Proskauer, who had spent most of his life under the Ireland roof, could honestly agree.

"I hope you get as good a wife," the Old Man said.

"I think I will, sir," Johnny said, and felt himself flush.

"I think you will, too. Mary Ashley is a fine girl." Fred Ireland squeaked back in his swivel chair and looked at the ceiling light and the dead bugs that spotted the inverted milk-white bowl of it.

"Johnny, a cop can't be too careful. As soon as you put on a uniform somebody steps alongside of you with some easy, quiet money to hand out. It don't have to be much money to look big to a cop."

Ireland cleared his throat, which already had the pure and unadulterated ring of Gabriel's trumpet about it.

"And it looks like a lot more money after you're married."

"I guess that's so," Johnny laughed.

"Women make certain demands. The best of them. Sometimes they don't even know it, but to the man who loves them the sighs and looks and that sort of thing seem like demands. You know they deserve more than you can give them, and you want to give them more. Marriage just isn't a matter of another mouth to feed, see?"

Ireland shifted around in the seat of his chair.

"Sometimes a cop will have kids," he said awkwardly. "Not me. Didn't have any kids of my own. But then you turned up. You, Anna

Proskauer's kid." He massaged his chin with his palm, and the toilet paper came off the razor cut. "Darn this nick!" He got up and hurried to the lavatory as though he thought he might bleed to death.

"Wonderful woman, your mother," came his voice.

Johnny Proskauer hung a hip on the corner of the chief's desk. There was a slight smile on his lips.

"I can remember the day you were born," the chief said, as he came back to his desk. "We had only six men on the force then, and me the youngest of the lot. I was coming along Main Street, and your mother was walking toward me. There was slush on the sidewalk that evening, and your mother fell down and started to cry."

Johnny had heard this often before, but he didn't mind hearing it again. He didn't mind hearing how rookie cop Fred Ireland had tried to help Mrs. Proskauer up. She had screamed in her broken English that she was going to have a baby.

"Not now?" Fred had asked, terrified. And Mrs. Proskauer had said, "Sure, now."

"And she meant now, too," the chief said, chuckling. "There wasn't any time to get her to the hospital. All I could do was take her into the Greek's, tell the Greek to call the doctor and get the customers out. The Greek started yelling that this was no hospital, it was a restaurant. I was trying to shut up the Greek, quiet your mother, and at the same time I was praying that the doctor would arrive before you did."

The chief and Johnny laughed. Johnny scarcely remembered his mother, and his father not at all. It was Fred Ireland who had been father to him, and he had always called Mrs. Fred Ireland, "Mom."

"Aren't you off duty, now?" Ireland asked. Johnny nodded. The chief said, "Get on out of here then. And, Proskauer, no more fighting with Patrolman Kimmel. Kimmel is a fine cop. A better one than you are."

Johnny felt his ears redden.

"Yes, sir," he said.

One thing about the Old Man—he never showed any favoritism where Johnny was concerned.

"Say, Pop," Johnny suggested before he left the office, "Mary's boss has her working late tonight. Suppose I hang around until you're ready to go, and we'll walk home together?"

The chief shook his head. "I don't know when I'll be going home."

"Isn't this Thursday night?" Johnny asked.

For years the chief had been knocking off on Thursday nights to take Mrs. Ireland to the movies.

"I sent Mom to the early show," Ireland said. "I can't make it tonight. Got things to do."

Leaving the city hall, Johnny allowed himself to worry a little about Chief Ireland. The Old

Man had been trying to tell him something to-night—something besides that well-worn story of Johnny's birth. Fred Ireland wasn't a man to have trouble expressing himself, yet it did seem that he had something on his mind he couldn't get off. Lately he'd been cryptic, that's what. Take the business about the steel box.

It was a strong box the chief had—a flat, green enameled steel box around the city hall. Like on Tuesday, when Mr. Lockwood, the city clerk, had stopped in Ireland's office.

Johnny had heard the Old Man telling Lockwood, angrily, "One of these days, I'm going to stand this whole damn town on its ear. You'll find out, Lockwood, damn it!"

Johnny, glancing through the chief's door, had seen Ireland slapping the green steel box which happened to be resting on top of the desk. The following morning there had been a good deal of speculation about Ireland's steel box. It was said that there was some unrest among the city fathers in the council room. As for little Mr. Lockwood, he had kept cocking his ear as though listening for the rattle of skeletons in his own closet.

Another thing, the chief was packing a gun, and he hadn't done that since his paunch had spoiled the fit of his belt and holster. He was packing his old Police Positive in an under-arm harness.

Well, he was certainly old enough to take care of himself. Or maybe he was too old. Johnny sighed, kept on walking.

INSTEAD of going to the Ireland home, he headed for the flat which he had leased in preparation for his marriage to Mary Ashley. He spent a good deal of time there, sort of wearing off the smell of new paint.

When he reached the flat, a man was waiting for him in the hall. The man wore a tan topcoat and an oyster-shell hat. His round face was illuminated by a ruddy lump of nose. He showed gold teeth when he smiled, like brass andirons in a fire-place. His name was Graves, he said, and he had something to talk over with Johnny Proskauer. It was easy to figure why he had come here instead of going to the Ireland house. The new phone directory had just come out, and Johnny had arranged for a listing even if he wouldn't be living in the flat for another month. Johnny invited Graves to come in, and unlocked the door.

There was not a whole lot of furniture in the future Proskauer living room—a chair with matching ottoman, and a drop-leaf table with a lamp on it. Graves took the chair, which left the ottoman to Johnny.

Graves slapped his thigh as though he was pounding with a gavel, and gave himself the floor. "Here's the proposition. You're on pretty good terms with Chief of Police Ireland, aren't you?"

Johnny nodded. "Lived with him since I was four."

"That's what I heard. Well, I'll tell you, Proskauer, Fred Ireland is going to get himself in trouble. Bad trouble, and we don't want him to do that. He has in his possession a certain steel box, and that's what's going to get him into trouble. It couldn't be any more dangerous if it was a time bomb."

"Why?" Johnny wanted to know. He was forming an immediate dislike for Mr. Graves.

"It isn't my secret, so I can't share it. But I'll tell you how it is; If you'll get that steel box and hand it over to me, nobody's going to get into any trouble, and you'll get a five-hundred-dollar cash wedding present."

Johnny smiled. "You believe in avoiding trouble?"

"I sure do."

"Then you'd better start avoiding and get the hell out of here before I hang one on you."

Graves stood up, took his hat off for the first time, but only to put a new crease in the crown. He told Johnny to sleep on it and said he would see him tomorrow. Johnny said Graves might as well save his eyesight, and slammed the door hardly before Graves had time to get his stern clear. Then Johnny went into the bedroom and changed from his uniform to his Oxford gray business suit.

The steel box again! A funny thing, that. Johnny shook his head and worried a little more about the chief. Looking at his watch he saw that he still had an hour to kill before he could go pick up Mary. He decided to walk back to the city hall and have a talk with the Old Man.

He was about a square and a half from the city hall on Oak Street when he thought he saw Chief Ireland coming toward him, hat shoved on the back of his head, head lowered, his footsteps plodding. He had something under his left arm, and if the darkness wasn't fooling with Johnny's eyes, the thing was Ireland's green steel box.

Johnny was about to hail the chief, when he saw two shadowy figures come out of the alley mouth which Ireland had just crossed. Ireland must have been aware of his two followers just a moment too late, for as he turned one of them tried to burst a sap over the chief's head, while the second grabbed the steel box.

Ireland sat down heavily on the pavement. He got onto one knee and pulled his gun. The two rob-and-kill boys lammed toward the alley and the chief fired twice—a couple of clean misses. The chief got to his feet. There was gun flame from the alley mouth and Ireland turned slowly on one heel and stumbled backward to the wall of a building. The wall was holding him up when Johnny reached him.

"Pop! You're hurt!" Johnny said.

"The hell I am!" the Old Man said. "Get those thieving buzzards!"

Johnny didn't have a gun. He'd left his

harness off when he had switched clothes. He never packed a gun off duty.

"Swell cop you turned out to be!" the Old Man yelled at him, and shoved his hot gun into Johnny's hands.

JOHNNY ran to the alley mouth, shot at sound in the black darkness, drew lead in return.

Keeping close to the building walls, he ran after the escaping hoods. He saved his shells. There wasn't any way out of the alley, except the openings at either end, big enough to let a rat escape, he knew. But eventually the two hoods would target themselves against the brilliantly lighted street at the other end. As soon as he saw his chance, he stopped in his tracks, stood as stiffly as though he was on the pistol range, and spent his slugs. The man with the box fell, while his companion lost his nerve and devoted everything he had to a get-away.

Back in the street, Johnny heard a healthy blast from the chief's whistle. He breathed a little easier with the Old Man alive and squawking. He approached the man on the alley pavement, gripping his gun like a hatchet.

"Got you covered," Johnny warned. He got no answer except a low groan.

Johnny picked up the box.

It had happened close enough to the city hall so that the shots and the Old Man's whistle brought half a dozen cops to the scene—Kimmel, Prather, Rourk, and the rest.

Rourk jerked his head back in the direction from which Johnny had come. "Where's the Old Man? Was he hurt, Johnny?"

Johnny didn't know. He ran back up the alley, to find the chief where he had left him, leaning up against the side of the building. Ireland was breathing hard.

"Did you get the box, Johnny?" he gasped.

Johnny tapped the steel box with his knuckles. "Sure."

"Give it to me," Ireland said, and put out eager hands.

Johnny put the box into the Old Man's hands.

"Listen, Pop, I got to talk to you about that box. It's dangerous to you."

"Give me my gun," Ireland said doggedly. And as soon as Johnny handed him the gun, the chief broke it and looked at the cylinder. "And it took you all those shells to bring down a grab-and-run, purse-snatching skunk. . . .!"

Johnny felt he'd done pretty well, better than the chief, in fact. But he didn't make a point of it. Ireland was holding onto Johnny's coat lapel, talking into Johnny's face. Johnny listened.

"You're to hang around here until the boys from the paper turn up. Then you get an honest reporter, Johnny, if there is such a thing. I think Weeden is a pretty square chap. You get Weeden and bring him over to the city hall. I'll be in my office."

Johnny wondered if the Old Man was going to make a hero of himself or something. Fred Ireland hadn't handed out any stories to the papers personally in about a year.

"You're all right, are you?" Johnny asked.

"Sure," Ireland said. "Fit as a drum and can't be beat. Meet me at my office with Weeden, understand?"

Johnny went back into the alley to wait for the ambulance and the boys from the newspapers. It wasn't much of a wait, and as soon as Weeden of the *Courier* spotted Johnny he came up and wanted to get the story.

"I haven't got any story," Johnny said. "But the chief has."

"Nuts to the chief's story," Weeden said. "I know crime doesn't pay, though they don't seem to be troubled with unemployment in the profession. What I want is a story and not a lecture. You shot the guy, didn't you?"

Johnny said, "The chief's got a steel strong box. That was what the fight was about. They snatched the box."

"Oh-oh!" Weeden took Jimmy's arm. "You mean the chief might spill the dope about the box. The box. Say, I've heard he's got enough evidence in that box of his to convict the mayor of murder."

Johnny shrugged. "I don't know, but the chief told me to get you and bring you over to his office."

JOHNNY and the reporter found Fred Ireland seated at his desk. The green steel box was in front of him and he held his revolver in his right hand. When they entered, the Old Man raised his head. His jaw jutted, determination shoving through a mask that was old and tired looking. The chief was still taking breath in shallow gasps.

"Sit down," he said to Johnny and Weeden. "You listen, Johnny. Weeden, you figure a newspaper yarn from this. You throw in all the 'it is rumored' stuff. These are the facts. On the State and Pearl Street paving jobs, the Super Surface Company got the contract. Super Surface gets most of the paving work in town."

"I've wondered about that," Weeden said.

"Not enough people have wondered. Anyway, the Three States Asphalt Company put in a bid, too, and it was thrown out by the clerk and councilmen. Why? I'll let you guess. The Three States bid was lying on Mr. Lockwood's desk one morning. About an hour later it was gone. Lockwood almost had a fit. He came to me and offered five hundred dollars for that Three States bid. I didn't come across, so he upped the graft to a thousand bucks, and I still didn't come across.

"That was why the attack on me tonight," the chief said, patting the steel box. "I been telling them all I had something in this box that would enable me to set the town on its ear."

"How'd they figure you had the bid?" Weeden asked.

"Well, the Three States bid was found missing shortly after I'd left the clerk's office that morning. Process of elimination," the chief explained. "Lockwood and the city fathers wanted it back so badly that when they found they couldn't buy it from me, they sent a man named Graves, of the Super Surface Company, to Johnny to try and bribe him to swipe it from me."

The Old Man looked at Johnny and grinned. "But I brought Johnny up right."

"Let me get this straight," Johnny said. "It sounds as though maybe the Three States bid was lower than the Super Surface bid. But Super Surface was going to cut a graft melon with the city fathers if they got the job."

"Sure," Weeden said. "That's obvious."

The chief looked at his turnip watch. He picked up the steel box, got slowly out of his chair.

"Boys," he said, "in the council room we'll find Lockwood and Hornaday and Bill Straight, and some of the other lanterns of virtue that run this city. You want to come along with me and see the fun?"

"You just bet we do!" Weeden cried.

The chief went to the door. He stumbled, but when Johnny caught him, he shook off the young cop's hand angrily. "Don't paw me, Johnny. I'm just a little tired, that's all."

Then he marched ahead of Weeden and Johnny to the council room.

Four members of the council were seated around the golden oak table. They didn't say anything. Ireland walked up to the table and put down the steel box. He rested the heels of his hands on the table edge and glared from one to the other of them.

"I said I was going to set this town on its ear, didn't I?" he said. "Well, boys, tonight's the night. I got something in that steel box that makes it all possible. If it was nearer Christmas, I'd have come in here with a sprig of mistletoe attached to my belt at the back. This is the night that's going to make up for all the years I've said yes when I should have been man enough to say no."

Councilman Hornaday nervously picked at his gray mustache. He said to Weeden, "I hope you understand that Chief Ireland isn't quite himself. He isn't feeling well."

Ireland chuckled. "Maybe not, but I got a damned good memory." He turned to Johnny. "You know how I got to be chief of police? Not on any particular merit except the ability to keep one side of my mouth closed while I spouted about honesty and integrity out the other side. Hell, I've delivered enough lectures on character building to fill a five-foot shelf of books. I talked a damn good chief of police. All the time, I was taking a bonus now and then from these paragons of virtue that have run this

town for ten years. A hundred bucks here, two hundred bucks there, to overlook Sal Magan's brothel or somebody's tavern. Or to overlook the fact that Lockwood built his house with city labor, charged up his coal to the treasurer's office, bought a lot of stuff which went onto the city bills and consequently out of the taxpayer's pockets."

The chief took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. Johnny could see the Old Man's lower lip wasn't too firm.

"I'm a dirty hypocrite," Ireland said. "I got one excuse, and it's a feeble one. I didn't have enough character to resist the hand-outs that came my way. I had a wife and I loved her more than my own soul. I wanted her to have things I couldn't afford to get her on an honest copper's pay. And then—"

The Old Man turned to Johnny Proskauer.

Johnny knew this was what the chief had been trying to get off his mind, what he had tried to tell Johnny earlier that evening.

THE Old Man took a key out of his pocket and tossed it on the table beside the steel box.

He said to Hornaday, "You go ahead and open the box." And when Hornaday hesitated, the chief cursed him into doing it. "Hell, it's what you hired your thugs to get from me, wasn't it?"

Hornaday's trembling fingers worked with the lock, got the lid open. Weeden and Johnny crowded forward to look into the box. The city fathers bent their august heads over the box. Hornaday reached in, took out two long official-looking envelopes. He opened the flaps, stared at the contents a moment, then let the envelopes fall back into the box.

He said, "There—there's no paving bid in here," in a dazed sort of way.

"Nope," Ireland said. "I never saw the damned bid. Somebody entered Lockwood's office that day besides me."

"Who?" Lockwood gasped.

"Purdy, the janitor," Ireland said. "He cleaned up the floor, and I guess the Three States bid had blown off Lockwood's desk and found its way into Purdy's waste basket. He burned the damned thing. But the contents of the box—you've looked at it, haven't you, Hornaday? You know what it means?"

"I—I must confess I am at a loss to explain the matter," Hornaday said.

"It means this," the chief said. He reached

across the table, got Hornaday by his gray mustaches, pulled him far enough across the table so that the councilman's head came within reach of Ireland's left hook. Hornaday went sideways over a chair and hit the floor.

Ireland yanked Bill Straight to his feet. Straight put up his fists. Ireland let go a long one that carried the chief around on his heels, and Ireland lost his balance and fell on his face. "Pop!" Johnny said.

Ireland was motionless on the floor, breathing audibly. Johnny dropped to his knees beside him, reached in under the chief's coat. A handkerchief soaked with blood was balled up between the coat and the chief's shoulder.

"That—that damned thug with the gun pinked me, Johnny," Ireland gasped. "It's me that's on his ear, not the town. . . ."

JOHNNY was scared. He was scared until three o'clock in the morning when the doctor came out of Ireland's room at the hospital and told Johnny and Mrs. Ireland that they could see the chief.

"He's going to be all right," the doctor said. "A couple of weeks' rest and he'll be as good as new."

They went into the room and sat down in the hard, stiff chairs at the chief's bedside. The chief was pale, but there was a smile on his thin lips. The first thing he wanted to know was if Johnny had looked in the steel box. Johnny hadn't.

"Then you don't get the joke," Ireland said. "It's pretty damned funny. Nothing in the box but a life insurance policy made out to the city, which will cover all the graft that I've taken from the 'taxpayers' pockets. Just that and a retirement annuity which goes into effect tomorrow. That little scene in the council room tonight was my way of resigning. And I guess the whole council will have to resign with me!"

The nurse came in shortly after to tell Johnny and Mrs. Ireland to say good night to the chief. But Ireland kept hold of Johnny's hand even after Mrs. Ireland had gone outside.

"Johnny," the Old Man whispered. "I wish I knew something. I wish I was damned certain that if I had had that low pavement bid, like they thought I did, I wouldn't have handed it over to Lockwood when he offered a thousand bucks for it."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have," Johnny said.

The Old Man's eyes brightened. "Are you, son? Then that makes it all right."

DEATH BREAKS THE DATE

by
Francis K. Allan

THE heavy door closed slowly behind Ben Mason, and he stood alone on the gravel path. He squinted slightly into the torrent of spring sunlight. Strange, he thought—seeing a color that wasn't gray. He drew a deep breath, and the field smells tingled sharply in his nostrils. A little wind stirred his short black hair. He closed his eyes and drank with a silent thirst.

At last he looked back, to the gray, high walls behind him; to the cold, spaced turrets that measured each hundred feet; to the glassy-eyed searchlights, ready to blaze and hunt.

His lips made a silent word. It might have been good-by. Then he lifted the grip at his feet and started down the winding path toward the highway that led into town.

He made a bend, and the row of trees thinned. Then his steps halted. Far, to the bottom of the lane, the sun gleamed bright on the polish of a car. A long coupe, it was, parked on the highway. There were millions of cars in the world, maybe a million coupes like this. And yet. . .

In the shadowy interior, he could half see the outline of a man's face. A thin, lean face it was. An old pattern strayed in his mind: a black coupe, always; a lean face and black eyes; Fritz Cane. . . .

Carefully Ben drew back into the line of trees. His eyes followed the ribbon of highway until it turned and faded down a hill. Swiftly, then, he skirted back down the path and cut across the field. Grass burrs snatched at his legs. The grass made a whispering rustle against his shoes. His ears strained for the fire of a motor down on the highway. On he hurried until the field dipped down and the hidden curve of the highway made its turn. He looked back. There was no coupe. A mile ahead, the scattered roofs of the small town clustered. He lifted the grip again and moved faster.

"I WANT one ticket for New York," he told the station agent. "When is the next train?"

"Twelve-thirty. That's two hours," the man said drily. Ben paid and took the ticket.

"Is there a telegraph office around?"

"First door to the left."

Ben crossed the waiting room and turned to the left. He entered the musty, clicking little office and put his grip down again. The pencil hesitated above the yellow paper; then he wrote: *Peggy: I am coming back. Once we had a certain date. Will you keep it now?* Ben.

The operator counted the words. "Ninety-four cents."

Ben paid and lifted his grip again. He turned, and then he halted.

"Hello, Ben," lazied a mocking voice. "I missed you coming out."

The man stood in the doorway, his hands loose in his pockets. His head was half tilted, and his jaws moved rhythmically up and down on a piece of gum. His eyes waited, never blinking. Slowly, inside him, Ben sighed.

"Hello, Fritz," he said.

"You weren't going to take the rattler?" he chided softly. "Didn't you know we'd come and get you?"

"Why?" came the flat question.

The jaws worked on. The keys clacked and hammered behind Ben. Then they were still, and the room was strangely taut.

"You don't look very glad, Ben," Fritz mused slowly. "You didn't come down the front path," he added.

"I'm not taking your ride, Fritz," Ben said quietly. "You can tell the boys that goes all along. I'm not taking anything."

"Maybe they won't like it. Maybe they want to see you."

Ben put down his grip and moved slowly toward the man. The glint of his blue eyes matched the black of the other's. He stopped close before him.

"The answer is no," he said softly. "I've done my five years. And I've done some thinking. I'm through."

"Through," Fritz whispered, "or yellow?"

Ben's fist caught the thin smile on the lips and smashed it against the teeth. The man's head kicked back, then straightened. His fingers curled and inched upward as two thin rivulets of blood slipped from his mouth.

Ben waited, poised and tense, watching the curled fingers reaching. *This is going to be it, his mind whispered. I knew it would be this way. . . .*

The fingers stopped. Hypnotically, the jaws began to move again. The puffed lips made a smile.

"I'll tell them, Ben," he promised slowly. "I'll tell them just what you said."

And then the doorway was empty. The sun gleamed bright outside. The keys of the telegraph clattered. A motor caught and fired. And Ben still stood, his muscles coiled, his breath gone. Slowly the world drained back about him. He shook his shoulders. He

swallowed. But the tension wouldn't dissolve. Like a clock, it wound itself in his throat.

He had a gun, but he didn't shoot, Ben thought. That means—they're waiting. . . .

Slowly he walked outside. No more did he see the sun, or drink in the scent of spring. And from somewhere out of the past, he remembered a rule: Nobody can quit the game.

IT WAS almost twilight when Ben Mason climbed the stairs of Grand Central Station, and stepped into the snarl of New York traffic. He signaled toward a cab. It started forward. Just as he stooped to enter, something, some instinctive pull drew his eyes. There, parked across the street, sat a long and black coupe. In the twilight darkness a face was framed at the glass.

Ben started to give an address, then paused.

"Times Square," he ordered. He shifted in the seat and looked through the rear window. The black coupe cut a semi-circle and fell in with the flow of traffic, following.

"Fast, buddy," Ben ordered sharply. "Take the next right, and then right again. I'm leaving you on the first blind turn." He threw a bill over the seat and clutched his bag. The cab made one turn. A hundred feet behind, the black snout of the coupe followed. The cab made the second turn. For a moment, the coupe was blotted out. Ben jumped, hauling the bag behind him. Swiftly he melted into the darkness of a doorway. The cab moved on.

And the coupe wove after it, to be swallowed in the traffic.

He got another cab and gave an address.

Funny, he thought as he moved through the lobby, same mirrors on the walls; same crack in the ceiling. Places don't change much in five years.

"Sixth floor," he said. The elevator rose. He stepped out and moved down the corridor. And at last he stopped, waiting. Beneath the door shone a pencil of light. From within came a muted radio. As he stood there, so very still, even a perfume came back and touched his pulse in the darkness. Softly he turned the knob. The door eased back. There she was.

She was filing her nails at the little dresser, and her gold hair was loose at her forehead. She was frowning the least little bit, and her nose was still snub and freckled.

"Darn!" she said as the file slipped.

"Hello, Peggy," he said.

"Ben!" The file tinkled on the floor. "Oh, Ben." Then she was in his arms. Her hair was a mist against his cheek, and her lips were hungry on his. The perfume made a cloud in his head; his arms locked tight about her. Five years seemed but yesterday.

"I was going to be all dressed," she was crying—not really crying with tears. "I had a new

dress and—and a hat with a feather, and—Oh, Ben! Kiss me again," she whispered.

At last she held him away. Her fingers touched the short waves of his hair. A tiny shadow caught in her eyes.

"Is that the way they cut it—down there?" she asked softly.

"It'll grow out," he said.

"I wanted to come see you—a thousand times I wanted. Once I even got to the town. Then I took a train back again."

"I didn't want you to see. I didn't want you to remember."

"I know," she agreed. "Now it's just like words on a blackboard; you wipe them away, and everything's new again. You see?"

He looked at her carefully, as though he were hunting for something.

"You really believe we can wipe out five years?"

She started to answer quickly, then she did it a different way. Her head tilted. A little smile turned her lips. She grinned.

"I bought a new hat—with a feather," she whispered. "For you." A little moment ticked away between them. Then he found whatever he'd been hunting—in her eyes. He held her again and his lips touched the waves of her hair.

"Lots of times, down there, there wasn't a thing to do. Nothing but think and remember. I used to go back every step, trying to see where it started. I remembered the night I was hungry; when I didn't give a damn any more. There were a million people downtown that night. Out of the whole bunch, I stopped Bald Manton." He paused, recalling. "Things like that—like the one black bean in a jar. A job sounded good, then—any kind of a job. I remember the money Bald had in his pocket. How green and yellow it was. I remember the first run I ever made; how the water foamed white behind the boat, and then swirled away into black. A hundred dollars he gave me to go out in a little boat and bring a box to town." Again he stopped.

"I remember the first time I ever saw you. You were lost in the subway station. 'Where do I get on?' you said. I was going to be smart. Then I didn't say it, whatever it was. Maybe I looked at your eyes. A million people riding subways that night. Out of a million, you asked me.

"And I remember that last night. 'You won't forget?' you teased me. 'You won't stand me up?' 'I won't stand you up,' I said. That was at five o'clock. It was going to be at eight. At seven-thirty they got me. I—" He hesitated a moment—"the thing I remember most, I was standing in front of the dresser when the hand-cuffs clicked; I started to look down. Then I saw it there on the dresser. I'd been scared I'd forget it. I saw the names written on the lines: *Benjamin Mason . . . Patricia McCall. . . .*

And across the top, *Marriage License* . . . I looked till the words all blurred together. And I remembered what you'd said. I was standing you up, after all. . . ."

She drew back and looked at him slowly. "I don't want to remember that time, Ben. It's the words on the blackboard. All wiped out, you see?" She swallowed. "I just want to know one thing."

"Yes?" He waited.

"You won't stand me up again? Because," she said very softly, "I'm going to be waiting again."

He looked at her. He knew what she was saying. He knew the questions she was asking behind the words. *You won't go back again, Ben? Not back to the old way again? It won't ever be that way?*

"I won't stand you up again," he promised quietly. She knew what he meant.

At twelve o'clock he left.

"I'll meet you at noon, Peggy. By the information desk. I'll have the tickets. The train leaves at twelve-eighteen."

He didn't see the black coupe as he went down the walk outside. He went away, still humming. But the black coupe stayed behind.

ONE yellow light was burning above the window marked *Manager*.

Ben peered inside.

"Grady," he called. A sleepy mountain of flesh blinked awake.

"Uh! What you say?" Then recognition woke on the flabby face.

"Mason! Ben Mason!"

"How about a room for tonight? And I'd like to get the clothes I stored here."

"Sure, I got a room. And the stuff's downstairs." He looked Ben over. "Bald said he figured you'd be picking up your stuff—"

"Bald Manton was here for me?"

"It ain't was," Grady corrected. "That's him over there, waiting."

"Waiting—" Ben turned. Across the dim lobby a man was sprawled in a chair.

"Hello, Ben," he drawled softly. "I've been waiting." He took a last drag on the cigarette, then arched it across the room. "Get the key to your room. We'll go upstairs."

The measured words brought back the clock in Ben's throat. It began to tick . . . tick. A spring began to coil.

"Didn't you hear me, Ben?" came the soft question. "I said we're going upstairs." He arose and sauntered closer.

"You can say it down here."

"But I'm going to say it upstairs." He turned. "Give me the key, Grady." Silently the man handed it through the window.

"Let's go up." He moved toward the stairs. Ben watched his swaying shoulders with a fixed stare. One little bead of sweat turned salty on

his lips. Slowly his foot stepped forward, following. The spring kept coiling tighter. Up, up he climbed, after Bald Manton. And as he went, he kept thinking: *If I can get by this, it isn't long till tomorrow. Not long till twelve-eighteen. . . .*

Bald opened a door and switched on the one light. He waited while Ben passed him; then the latch clicked shut. Ben turned. The eyes of the two men met, blue and gray and hard.

"Okay—we're in the room. What is it?"

"Fritz tells me you're pulling out," Bald mused.

"Fritz tells you right. I'm through."

Bald lit another cigarette. Over the tip of flame, he studied Ben distantly. He blew a slow cloud of smoke.

"I don't think so," he decided. "Not yet."

"No?" came the brittle challenge.

"No," he echoed. "You see, Ben, there's a little job in town that needs to be done. I've been thinking; I'm going to let you do it."

"The answer is no. I said I was through, and I meant I—"

"You remember James Shannon," Bald moved on deliberately. "He's still the vice prosecutor. And he's still got ideas about cleaning up the dope racket. He's been making it a little hard, now and then. I— The boys and I talked it over. We decided you ought to go see Jimmy Shannon." He stopped pointedly. "We decided we'd let you kill him, Ben," he said softly.

"So that's the answer! First it was bring the stuff from the boats. Now you're making it murder!" Ben took a hard breath. "And if I don't?"

"But you will," came the promise.

"I will not!" he hit back. "First, I'm through! And if I was a damn fool, I wouldn't pull that job. Wouldn't it be pretty—Shannon sends Mason up for five years. Mason gets out. Shannon gets knocked off. Guess who did it! No!" he said coldly.

Bald smiled wearily. His hand moved inside his coat. When it came out, there was a gun—a squat, heavy Luger. He offered it to Ben, handle first.

"Remember it?" he asked. "I cleaned it up for you. It's all ready. I want Shannon out by tomorrow."

Ben looked at the gun. He took it, turning it slowly, feeling its warm weight in his hand. Then he measured the distance to the waste basket. The gun hit with a heavy *plunk!*

"That's the answer."

Bald's eyes idled with a pale gray mist. A little white line furrowed out from his mouth.

"That wasn't very smart, Ben," he said very stilly. Slowly he reached into the basket and lifted the gun. He dropped it into his pocket. Then he smiled. "I want to make a call."

He took the extension off the hook and dialed.

Almost immediately a muted voice crackled through.

"Fritz?" Bald said softly. "My hunch was right? Good. I think everything will be all right then." He slipped the receiver back on the hook and turned. Again he smiled, with a quirk to his thin lips.

"When you change your mind, you can get me at the old number, Ben. I'll be waiting for a call."

"You'll wait till hell freezes!" Ben retorted.

"No, Ben," he whispered. "I'll wait until tomorrow. That's all." He opened the door. Gently, with a muted click, it closed behind him. That was all there was.

Strangely Ben stared at the blank wall. A bare emptiness hugged his throat. It was as though he stood in a room of mirrors. A thousand unseen eyes were watching. Lips were moving beyond a pale he could not probe. They spoke of him. They played with him.

He felt like a mouse in a cage.

"Oh, God," he whispered. He sank down on the bed. "It isn't long till tomorrow. God—please let me get away, God," he whispered, "I'm scared. . . ."

TWELVE o'clock in Grand Central Station.

About the information desk flowed the endless river of people. High in the roof, the echo of a thousand heels made its incessant murmur. The metallic clash of a gate rasped above the low thunder. A baby cried thinly in a woman's arms. And a man stood waiting. Two bags waited at his feet. In his hand were two tickets. His eyes watched the clock; and then they watched the inflowing crowd, hunting, anxiously hunting for a girl with golden hair.

The clock marked another minute. Another. And another.

The man shifted the tickets in his damp fingers. He hunted a cigarette. Suddenly he stilled. Gold hair showed through the crowd.

"Peggy! Here I am! Here I—" The words died blankly. The golden hair went on. The girl was not Peggy. And the clock rolled along! Twelve-five.

"She'll be coming soon. I know she'll be coming soon."

Twelve-ten. The hurrying tide swept past him. Everyone was rushing, rushing to a train.

"She'll be here in a minute. In just a second, now," he whispered. "She just got caught in a jam."

Twelve-fourteen. There was a lull in the passing. He stood almost alone. He could see to the far-distant doors the way by which she would come. She was not coming. No golden hair came down the long gray hall. And then it was twelve-fifteen.

The clock said so. He asked a stranger, and his watch said so. Slowly his fingers crumpled,

and the tickets became a damp ball. The ball rolled across the floor and someone kicked it away.

"She didn't mean it," he spoke to himself. "The five years wouldn't rub out after all—" He swallowed.

"Something happened! I know something happened! She wouldn't do it; she wouldn't do it this way." His feet were moving, beating a swift staccato. He slammed the door of the telephone booth and dialed in hard jerks. He heard the distant ringing again and again. Then it broke.

"Hello? Hello, Peggy? This is—"

"This is Mrs. Shaffer. Miss McCall's gone."

"Where is she? Where did she go?"

"I don't know. She left last night, sometime late, I guess. There's a number here where you can call her, a note says—" The voice fumbled a moment, then gave a number. Slowly Ben repeated it.

"Thanks," he said briefly. The connection broke. To himself he repeated the number. *Strange, he thought suddenly; I've heard that number before somewhere. A lot of times. . . .*

He dialed. Once the distant ringing echoed; then a voice answered.

"Hello, Ben," it said softly. The voice was not Peggy's. It was the voice of Bald Manton. "I've been waiting," it said. And then Ben knew why the number had been familiar.

"But—" Then the pattern slammed together. Peggy's room. . . . A telephone number . . . Bald Manton answering. . . . And Peggy hadn't made the train. . . . One hard breath broke in Ben's throat.

"Where have you got her, Bald?"

"Where she's going to stay, until. . . ." The voice waited.

"Until when?" came the tight question.

"Go out and get a noon paper, Ben. I'll be waiting for you to call back."

"But, I—Listen, damn you! You leave that girl—"

"Get a noon paper, Ben." The connection broke. Ben stared into the black receiver. The dead hum grew in his ears. Noon paper. Why? Noon paper. . . .

He folded back the door and stepped outside. Down the corridor, his eyes found a newsstand.

"Something for you, mister?" the clerk asked.

"Yeah, a paper. Noon paper."

"Right over—" The man's words vanished. Slowly his jaw settled open. His eyes opened in a wide stare.

"Where?" Ben snapped impatiently. Then he saw. He rattled a coin across the counter and took the paper. He turned away, his eyes searching the front page.

"God—" The clerk's whisper strayed behind him. The man kept staring as Ben moved away.

THE headlines told about the war. There were a couple of pictures—a General Somebody. . . . Nothing on that page. Ben started to turn. His fingers stilled. All of the page drained away—all but two little squares; two pictures at the bottom. *Slain!* That single word was the heading of one; and beneath was the picture of Vice Prosecutor James Shannon. *Hunted!* That word headed the other. And Ben Mason was staring at a picture of himself. He read about it:

Special Vice Prosecutor James Shannon was slain in the early hours of morning as he parked his car before his East Side apartment.

Immediately on discovery of the crime, police spread a drag-net through the city for Benjamin Mason, former dope-runner whom Shannon was instrumental in sending to prison five years ago.

Mason was released yesterday. A check-up indicates that he was in the city at the time of the crime. A gun, a Luger, found one hundred yards from the site of the crime has been established as the death weapon. This gun, at the time of its discovery, bore fingerprints which checked with those on Mason's police record. Mason, a slender, blue-eyed. . . .

The paper crumpled on the floor. Blindly Ben stared into gray space. A gun, a Luger. . . . His finger-prints. . . . He remembered the noise the gun had made as it hit the waste basket; remembered its warm weight as he'd held it in his fingers. *Slain! Hunted!* Ben Mason!

Something touched his ears—the measured pace of footsteps; heavy, deliberate, apart from the hurrying crowd. His eyes jerked up. The cop was coming, carefully, watching Ben intently. In the background the news clerk was pointing.

One more endless moment Ben stared. The cop crossed a patch of bright light. His face was set and hard; his hand started down.

He's going to shoot me! Ben realized. He broke blindly into the crowd. A shout roared behind. A whistle shrilled to the roof. Ben raced on. A sea of white faces opened before him. A million eyes swung in focus. The whistle shrilled again. A woman's thin scream wavered. Ahead rose a bright square of sunlight—a door. Behind came the hammer of feet. The blast of his breath dulled his ears. He stumbled as he hit the steps, then he was running again through the crowds on the walk. A red mist burned in his eyes. Now sounds were everywhere; from below, from the subway, and from the roar of cars ahead, the pounding feet behind.

Got to—got to get away, his mind kept taunting. Somewhere a siren wailed sharply. A taxi stopped ahead. It was empty. Ben tore at the door and fell into the seat.

"Hurry!" he panted. "Go—Go on. I'll tell you. . . ."

Slowly the wheels started turning. The breath came back in Ben's lungs. He stared

ahead, unseeingly. And then he closed his eyes.

"I knew," he whispered vacantly. "Deep inside I knew. It had to happen. You can't ever quit. You can't, can't ever," he sobbed. The wheels rolled on. "You think things can change, like taking a train, like wiping a black-board clean. That's what you think. But you can't ever do it that way. Whatever you ever did comes back to get you. You never get away."

"Made up your mind, buddy?" the driver asked.

"Huh? Oh—" *There's no place to go, he realized; there'll never be a place to go now. No place but back there. . . .*

Then he stopped a moment, and he remembered. He remembered Peggy.

"Yes," he said very slowly. "I've made up my mind." He gave Bald Manton's address.

NO MORE did his ears hear the siren wailing. They did not care. When he crossed the street, he passed a cop. Perhaps he never saw; his eyes were fixed ahead. He went into the lobby of the building. He rode the elevator to the fourteenth floor and walked down to a closed door. He tested the knob. It was locked. He knocked.

A silence answered, and then a voice: "Who is it?"

"Let me in, Bald," he said tonelessly. The lock rattled. The door edged open. He stared into the round hole of a gun. Quietly he shut the door behind him.

"Where have you got her?"

"Where she's going to stay until you tell the cops you killed Shannon. When you confess, we'll call it even."

The gray eyes waited, cold above the tiny black hole of the gun.

"I don't believe you. You'll never let her go alive."

"You've got to trust me, Ben," he mocked softly. "Don't you?"

"No."

Bald smiled. "That's too bad. But it doesn't much make a damn, does it? You're nailed for a murder, and you're going to put in the last spike. I wouldn't like to lose a good man like Fritz. So you're going to make it sure."

Ben looked at him a long time.

"You figured everything, didn't you?" He swallowed. "Nothing makes a damn to you! You framed me. You know you've got me. You've got her. You'll kill her. You know you will! You'll never let her get loose! You'll never—"

"That's a chance you've got to take. You've got to believe me, Ben." He waited a pointed moment. "Don't you?"

"I—" Ben stood still. "Yeah," he sighed at last. "I've got to trust you. And if I know you, it won't do any good." Again he stopped. His tongue moved along his lips.

"Can I see her? Before—"

"No." Then Bald's eyes took a slow gleam. "Yeah, maybe you can," he decided slowly. "You can see her. You can tell her you killed Jimmy. Tell her with your own lips, see? I'd like to watch that."

"That—that's the only way?"

Bald nodded.

"Let me see her," Ben said then.

"That door." Bald nodded. "And, Ben—this little gun is going to be in my pocket. It'll be lookin' her way. Understand?"

"You'd like to kill her," Ben whispered, "with me watching."

He turned the knob. The door opened slowly. And there she was. Her legs and arms were bound. There was a gag in her mouth. Her gold hair was tousled about her face. And on the floor lay a hat—a hat with a little red feather.

"Peggy," he sobbed. Swiftly his steps carried him to her. He knelt down. "You—you're all right?" Her throat moved as she tried to speak. The gag made a hash of her words.

"Damn," he choked. He tore it away.

"Ben— Oh, Ben," she sobbed. "Where . . . what. . ."

"Tell her, Ben," spoke a voice behind him.

"What is it, Ben? Tell me what?"

"I—I—"

"Tell her, Ben." Ben heard the words. He remembered the gun.

"I—Peggy, listen—I killed a man."

"No," she breathed. "No! No!" she burst out. "Something's making you say—"

"Keep talking, Ben. Tell her all about it," the voice taunted.

"Peggy, listen, I—Oh, God, I can't," he sobbed. He stumbled up and faced Bald. His fingers bit in his palms. Sweat mixed with the angry tears. His breath burned hot through his throat.

"I won't! I can't! You can't make me! Shoot me! Damn you, shoot me. I won't—"

"You know where the gun is looking," Bald reminded softly, "I wouldn't move, Ben." He shifted, catlike, in a semi-circle.

"Now start moving to the door. Straight ahead and slow," came the order; ice and hard it was.

"Ben! Don't go! Please don't—"

"I've got to. I've got to. You don't understand what—"

The knock broke his words. Hard and blunt it came, from the hall door. It ended and an electric hush froze the room. Bald breathed sharply.

"Damn you! You led the cops after you! You—" His face was stained with black fury. A muscle kicked in his temple. Then, with one gliding step, he moved behind Peggy's chair. The gun came out of the pocket. The muzzle fitted against her blonde hair.

"Walk out that door, Ben. Shut it behind you. When you get to the outside door, make a break. You get them cops away or I'm going to ruin a lot of yellow hair."

"Bald—"

The knock came again, imperative, demanding.

"Walk!" Bald cracked. Ben knew he wouldn't speak again. Next time it would be the gun. Deep inside, he knew it really didn't matter. Now Peggy knew too much. Maybe that was the way Bald had wanted it; the hard way that hurt. There wasn't a chance. There wasn't a damn thing any more, he realized.

But his feet were moving. Slowly they were moving toward the first door. Because they had to move. Because, even when you died, you hoped for a miracle.

THERE wasn't another sound as the latch clicked behind him. Step. . . . Step. . . .

Step. . . . On he went to the last door. He touched the lock. He drew a deep breath. Silently he slid the key.

"This is it," he whispered to himself. He closed his eyes and jerked. And then it came!

One high, piercing scream that shattered itself on the walls. And then came the shot—one shot.

The scream strangled into nowhere, and the shot was gone.

"Oh, God!" Ben breathed starkly. He plunged back into the room. And behind him spilled a great, shouting wave of blue uniforms.

"Stop, Mason!" one voice shouted. "Don't make a move."

He never heard. He was staring across the room. There, in the chair, she was slumped. A tiny trail of red was blending with the golden waves of her hair. The curtain of the window stirred in a light breeze. Bald Manton was gone from the room.

Ben's eyes wouldn't leave the golden hair. His lips wouldn't move. Peggy. . . . Peggy, something in him kept trying to whisper. The sounds wouldn't come. And her eyes wouldn't open. Perhaps Ben never heard the shot that knocked Bald Manton off the fire escape.

"Is she dead?" a cop asked.

"She—she was calling me," Ben whispered.

You stare at a flat, white wall, Ben was thinking. You can't remember when you started staring. Maybe a week ago. Maybe it was forever. People pass you by. But they're not people any more. They are just white shadows moving in a mist, just soft sounds rustling by. Only the wall is there.

Somehow it's a mirror, he thought on. Not a mirror for seeing—a mirror for remembering. You remember a girl in a subway station. She's lost. She asks you, "Where do I get on?" You remember a wave of gold hair. You remember a kiss, and another. You remember her words again: "You won't forget? You won't stand

me up?" You remember a piece of paper. Marriage License, it said.

Then a hat, with a little blue feather. . . . A date for twelve-eighteen. . . . Two tickets for a train.

And then you remember a scream! A shot! And then you start all over. . . .

Ben wondered dimly how long it had been. A day? A week? A year? Just that white wall there; and the white shadows passing by.

"You can go in for one minute, Mr. Mason."

He did not hear. It was only another shadow, he thought wearily.

"I said, you can go in for one minute."

"Huh?" He lifted bleary eyes. "What?"

"You can go in."

"In? Oh, in—" He got up. Mechanically he followed the shadow along the hall to a door. The door opened; and then he was alone. He

blinked. One step moved him forward. Again he blinked. There was a bed before him, and the room was white and still. Not quite still. Somewhere something touched his ears; a voice. "Ben," it was whispering. "Ben. . . ."

Then he began to see. Something began to beat in his throat. Something tangled inside. He stumbled down beside the bed.

"Peggy—Peggy—" he breathed.

"Ben." A finger touched him very softly. "Don't—don't cry, Ben. It's all right," she whispered. He could see her lips as they made a faint smile.

Then she promised gently, "There'll be another train."

A little breeze played through the window and brought the scent of spring. His fingers tightened on hers as he repeated, "There'll be another train."

THE BEGGARS ON HORSEBACK

(Continued from page 27)

WE HAVE almost forgotten about the Regis Arms now. With people as young as Lorelei and I—and with as much to live for—time dims all tragedy. We remember Valentine, though. We speak of him often—as one who had been our friend.

What happened to those others who lived at the Regis? I don't know. I try not to think about them. The police caught many; the more dangerous criminals escaped. The police had to be satisfied that with the death of Regis and Valentine, the leadership was gone and the syndicate of horror had folded.

I only know that Lorelei and I are married now—and happier than I dare tell. . . .

But something strange happened yesterday. We were leaving Sardi's, and standing near the curb was a ragged, wooden-legged beggar with a dirty patch over one eye. Yeah, Long John Silver! Perhaps I imagined that he was staring at us as we walked away. I didn't mention it to Lorelei. But she was deathly pale and biting her lips as we got into our cab. There's something else I didn't mention to Lorelei. Walking along Broadway this evening, I thought I saw Trigger Morney's face in the crowd.

As though from out of the traffic I heard Valentine's words: "*When you groped your way down that dark alley, it was a one-way walk. . . . You became bound to us—until death. . . .*"

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO DIE

(Continued from page 39)

as I hit the boat's deck, but a second later I sprang again for the far catwalk; in mid-air I hurled the lanterns backward, hitting the deck of the ship. The second they hit, I had Julia in my arms and was diving for the twelve-foot-deep water-dock. The small motorboat exploded into flame as though it were but a celluloid toy; the roar of that instantaneous inferno was like a bellow of giant lungs—*whoosh!*—and then we hit the water. Neither of us could hear the riot of noise behind us as I swam desperately under the protective wall of water. If I was exhausted when we finally emerged, Julia was half drowned. She'd had no warning of my sudden plunge.

But it was all over now. The arrival of Donlan and his squad, attracted by the conflagration, was what saved the lives of the others—that is, saved them from burning to death. The whole story was tumbling from Foreshall now, bitterly phrased and defiant. I didn't want to listen to all that again.

I looked at Julia standing there beside me. Her eyes were something beautiful to see, dazzlingly bright in her happiness, her faith in the future, and her sweet promise of a new tomorrow. A guy really doesn't deserve so much for so little. I felt pretty humble as I took her small hand in mine.

And I still feel that way, even today, in the bright future she promised me then. . . .

ASSASSIN IN ARMOR

(Continued from page 50)

Lana squeezed his arm gratefully, and one of the policemen grunted.

"Yeah? You don't think you're gonna cover it up like that, now my Jimmy is dead and Daugherty is gone." She went quickly to Scanlon's body, knelt beside it. The second trooper closed in behind her, fearful she was going to grab another gun out of the dead man's pocket.

But all she produced was a newspaper clipping, yellowed with age. The officer took it from her.

"Wow!" he muttered. "You know who we got here?" he asked his partner.

"Who?"

"This Scanlon is the 'Soup' Scanlon of that Gotham National Bank blow-up, back in nineteen twenty-nine. And I'd say this other one is Egghead Malino. They were the only two who lived through that nitro explosion. You remember—killed eleven customers of the bank and three of the mob."

The policeman with the clipping went over to the figure in armor. It took him a minute to slide the helm off. He pulled the velvet mask up from the dead man's face.

"Sure," he breathed. "This is Tolver. Harrison Tolver, the vice-president who was supposed to have been blown to smithereens."

Lana began to cry.

Jeanette sneered. "That ain't the half of it. Tolver wasn't killed. And he didn't get sent up like Daugherty and Jimmy did. But Tolver was

in on it—more than any of the rest of 'em. He planned it. And he got away with two hundred thousand dollars, cold cash. And what'd they got? Ten to fifteen years. Dannemora and Sing Sing. Bread and water. And no chance to see anybody they cared about. . . ." Her voice broke. "They got out, three years ago. They been looking for him ever since. Jimmy found him, by tracing the daughter, there. He got me the job as maid in the house. I could've killed him, any time; I'd have been glad to. But Jimmy wanted to do it himself."

"He was my father," Lana said, quietly. "He may have done wrong, but he did a good deal of good, too, trying to atone for it. I knew about this. It was because I knew it was true that I agreed to marry Jimmy Scanlon."

Curt thought of Scanlon's remark: *'A man could go to a wedding and the undertaker on the same day!'* The spindly man had sure called the turn on himself.

The taxi driver poked his head in from the hall corridor. "You want me to stick around, Mister Van Ness?"

Curt nodded. "Stand by." He touched his right arm at the wrist. "I'll need someone to run me over to the hospital."

Lana looked up into his face. "He hit you?"

The baritone smiled reassuringly. "Nothing serious. Won't interfere with our work. Remember, we've got a show to put on tomorrow."

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